



The Place Promised in Our Early Days

Arata Kanoh

Original Story by Makoto Shinkai

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The Place Promised in Our Early Days Arata Kanoh

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Makoto Shinkai

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Crying, racing northward, toward a sky holding the faint suggestion of a tower.

—*Kenji Miyazawa*

PROLOGUE

As I was waiting for the signal at the crosswalk in front of Odakyu HALC, I happened to look up.

Outside the west gate of Shinjuku Station, the sky was cramped, hemmed in on all sides by tall buildings. Plus, the color was duller in the early morning. It was blue enough for a reprieve from the gray city, though, and I could feel that summer was on its way.

I visualized that “summer aura” as something like a dense mass of air slowly descending from the heavens. Squinting, I tried to trick my eyes into seeing it.

In that instant, the memory of that special summer sixteen years ago came back to me.

My lungs constricted, and I thought I might tear up. It took me a little while to notice that the signal had turned green. Hastily, I started walking, a few beats behind the people around me, and made for the west ticket gate.

It was a terminal station during the commuter rush. The backs of the crowd formed a sort of current, surging through the automatic ticket gate one after another, and the sight didn’t surprise me or trigger any real emotion. When had I stopped being startled by how many people lived in one town, each of them with their own separate lives? I was aware of the fatigue I was carrying. I was thirty-one, and the weariness of those thirty-one years had seeped into me. It wasn’t that big a deal. But it wasn’t nothing, either.

Out of nowhere, I thought, *I don’t want to go to work today.*

It struck me as being just a little funny. What was I, a kid? Come to think of it, though, had I ever skipped school as a kid? I got the feeling I hadn’t. Ultimately, I probably hadn’t managed to grow up right. When someone doesn’t have it together as an adult, it’s because they flunked childhood. They don’t know how much value there is in being a grown-up. Whatever the cause, my misgivings about my stunted maturity lingered like a stiffness in my sides.

Mentally, I ran over my schedule for the day. I didn't have any meetings on the agenda. Some of my jobs were urgent, but they'd probably work out somehow. I tossed my work bag into a station coin locker, then locked it. I took my phone out of my pocket, started to call in...

But then I changed my mind, turned off the phone completely, and put it away again. If I was going to play hooky anyway, I wanted to do it all, like a kid.

When it came to my destination, I didn't hesitate. I took the Chuo Line to Tokyo Station. At the window, I bought a ticket to Aomori and an express ticket for the Tohoku Shinkansen, bound for Hachinohe. Boarding the 8:56 Hayate, I curled up in a cramped seat and dozed for three hours or so.

At Hachinohe, I transferred to an express that took me to Aomori Station. After a thirty-minute layover, I boarded a diesel train on the tiny Tsugaru Line. This train would go all the way to the tip of the Tsugaru Peninsula, the northernmost point on the island of Honshu.

The good old local line. A two-car train. Just five trains per day.

It hadn't changed a bit. The atmosphere in the practically deserted car was strangely gentle. The people who lived here in the Tsugaru region all used this one line, and these trains always had a certain familiarity peculiar to them.

I felt just a little alienated here.

After all, as far as this place was concerned, I was already a foreigner. That familiarity didn't include me anymore.

There was a middle-school couple in a distant box seat. I watched them, smiling a little. Their uniforms were from my old school, and they hadn't changed a bit. I could hear what they were saying. It was a trivial conversation, patent kid stuff. The boy and the girl both appeared to be having a lot of fun, though. They weren't holding back.

I used to be like that, too, long ago—cheerful and unreserved. My treasures were dumb little things and deliriously fun.

My best friend ever had been there—and so had one beautiful girl. The three of us had ridden this train together, and I'd wanted the slow, heavy diesel train to go even slower. Now, the memory felt like a story from some distant world...

Yes, I'd come a long way.

Back then, I'd stretched out my hand desperately, trying to go as far as I possibly could. But what was the place I'd been struggling to reach? This?

I didn't know.

I got off at Tsugaru-Hamana Station, one stop before the end of the line.

Glancing at the tiny bicycle parking lot out of the corner of my eye, I set off in the opposite direction from the village. I passed under the elevated track for the new Tsugaru Strait Line, which was only half-built and had never actually opened.

From there, the ground began sloping gently upward.

Before too long, I came upon the ruins of a prefab factory. I cut across its lot, bent down and stepped through its broken fence, then spent about half an hour climbing the small mountain behind it.

When I'd passed through a dense stand of trees, the view abruptly opened up to reveal a shining pale-green plain, almost like a pasture.

Young undergrowth had sprung up as far as the eye could see, releasing its fresh scent into the wind. It was a wide, endless world of light green.

Slowly, I started walking through the grass. The silky rustle of the blades brushing against one another softly tickled my ears.

A good distance away, on my right, the remains of a dilapidated station sat exposed to the elements. There was a row of three concrete platforms and a wooden pedestrian bridge rising up and over the tracks to connect them. The walls and floor of the bridge were broken in places. The station had been abandoned, half-finished, and in the end, not a single train had ever gone through it.

Nothing would ever come to this place, and you couldn't go anywhere from it.

Once, it had held something that was everything to me.

When I looked up, the sky was almost too wide. Thick, fluffy clouds floated across a deep-blue sky. I tilted my head back and turned in a circle, and the sky turned, too, as though the blue was gathering around me.

There was an airplane flying high overhead. A small, pure-white plane.

The Velaciela...

It wasn't there in the real sky, but I could see it in my memories—a plane with a strange shape, one you'd never, ever find in any aviation catalog.

The Velaciela.

It had been the product of our trio's combined strength. A heartrendingly beautiful plane.

"Oh, wow..."

I heard Sayuri's voice, right beside me—but that was just in my head, too. She was gone now. The remnants of the memory had replayed only when I saw this scene, that was all.

Even so, I saw her, as real as anything. I heard her phantom footsteps in the grass as she trotted up from behind me, ran past me, and turned. Her short school uniform skirt swayed, and so did her shoulder-length black hair.

"An airplane?!"

Sayuri sounded happy. She looked the way she had in middle school, sixteen years ago. *Why are you showing up so young? I know what you look like when you're older, you know.*

The touch of the wind on my skin pulled me back to reality.

Both the airplane and Sayuri vanished, like candle flames suddenly blown out.

I gazed absently at the spot where her illusion had stood.

I stood there for a while, in a daze, looking at the green of the grass and the blue of the sky. The ground swelled into a hill, and beyond it, I could see the cape. Beyond that was the ocean. The water was a chilly blue-black. It was deep and dark, but there was something strangely transparent about it. That was the color of the Tsugaru Strait in summer. On the other side, the gray-blue landscape of Hokkaido was visible—hazy, partially blended into the sky.

But something felt wrong. Something was missing from the picture.

Right. The tower.

Once, when you looked across the ocean at Hokkaido from this spot, there had been a white tower there, on the far side of a misty sky.

To be visible from the Tsugaru Peninsula, the tower had to be enormous and tall. It reminded me of the concept illustration of a space elevator I'd seen in a science magazine: a beautiful, perpendicular white line, as if it had been drawn onto the sky with a ruler. A gigantic, dreamlike structure that might have been brought in from another civilization on another planet... But there was nothing.

It's gone now. We lost it.

The green grass bent in the wind, rippling like water, bringing to me again that trace of Sayuri.

"I've always felt like...like I was going to lose something. As beautiful as this world is..."

She'd told me that, once—that she had always felt loss approaching. I was still in middle school, and there was no way I could really have understood what she meant, but those words had sent strange shivers through my soul.

It was several years before the war began. Back when Hokkaido was still called Ezo and occupied by another country—an enemy country. A place you could see, not so far away, but could never actually go to. Unreachable, at the far edge of the sky.

The place we promised.

Right. That summer, the three of us had looked at that tower from this spot, and we made a small vow together.

On that distant day, our promised place—hers and mine—stood beyond those clouds.

It was my fault we'd lost the tower.

Sayuri wasn't here with me anymore, either.

Sayuri... How was she? Why couldn't I be with her now?

As I listened to the grass rustling, I looked down, counting on my fingers. All the things I'd lost, damaged, or discarded over the course of these ten-odd years.

When I actually counted, there didn't seem to be all that many—so how could they be this heavy?

I started walking on unsteady legs over to where the rails lay, set in place and then abandoned. There was a spot where two tracks converged, then branched off again. When I reached it, I sat down on the rusty rails and cried, just a little. Maybe it was that all the things I'd lost were things I couldn't afford to lose. Still, that outcome was inevitable as long as I was me, and he was him, and she was her. Our destinations were set, and our routes hadn't allowed transfers.

I stayed there, unmoving, until the sun began to take on a slightly reddish tinge. Finally, I shook my head, dispelling my sadness. Slowly, I got to my feet, lightly dusting the red rust from my trousers. It was time to return to the present. Turning my back on that view beyond the ocean, I quietly started walking.

SUMMER

1

Let's go back more than ten years.

I was born and raised in a place called Sotogahama-machi, in Aomori Prefecture. It's at the tip of the Tsugaru Peninsula. Saying it's "at the far reaches of northern Japan" might get the point across.

At any rate, there was nothing there. All it had was the ocean, the mountains, a sparse scattering of houses and fields, and the Tsugaru Monument on Cape Tappi. There wasn't even a supermarket unless you got in the car and drove for almost half an hour. Out here, you needed a car to get by.

I'd heard that once upon a time, the place was bustling with people who came to fish from the rocks along the shore. The border with the Union was right there, though, and after diplomatic relations were severed and tension started rising in earnest, most of the fishermen stopped coming. In fact, there was no telling what would become of the Hamana Port fishing industry itself.

That said, the region had never been prosperous to begin with, so the relatively laid-back locals didn't seem to feel there was much of a crisis.

When the rest of the world thinks of Aomori, I'm pretty sure they think "lots of snow," Osamu Dazai, Shuuji Terayama, the US-Japan Misawa joint military base, the Nebuta Matsuri, and things like that.

The part about "lots of snow" is completely true. It comes whomping down from the sky (and *whomping* is the only word for it), but when I picture this land, I see it in deep green.

On the Tsugaru Peninsula, low mountains roll all the way to the edge of the ocean. In summer, after the snow is gone, the trees on those mountains turn a rich and beautiful color, like a more saturated version of viridian. Meanwhile,

the bright, pale green of the young grass and shoots catches the sunlight. I often gazed out at the contrast between those shades from the window of my house. The sight was full of gentle relief; any gloom I'd felt cleared away, putting my mind completely at ease.

The land itself may have been pastoral, but the eyes of the world had been trained on Aomori quite a lot over the past dozen or so years.

That was because Union-occupied Ezo was right across the Tsugaru Strait.

The Union was an enormous bloc of Communist countries that covered half the globe. Our area was the borderland separating that superpower from Japan.

In Aomori, in the first year of middle school, there was a special social studies unit where they drilled everything about the history between modern Japan and the Union into us. They wanted us to understand what was happening in the area where we lived.

The class itself was boring, but strangely, the things I learned stuck with me. In 1945, the Soviet Union broke the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, and by October, they had taken control of Hokkaido. Even after Japan regained its sovereignty in 1950, Hokkaido—now called Ezo—remained under Soviet control. In 1956, at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, Khrushchev declared the establishment of the Union Bloc, which would unite Russia and all Communist countries in Eastern Europe and Western Asia. In the latter half of the 1960s, there was a growing trend of nationalist activity in Ezo. To fight it, in 1973, the Union suspended diplomatic relations with Japan, then formally severed ties in 1974. To this day, Japan remained split into two sections, North and South. These questions always showed up on tests, which meant I could still recite recent Union-related history from memory, right down to the dates.

Actually, it might not have been because of the classes and tests.

Because exchange between the countries had been cut off abruptly one day in 1973, there were a lot of families around here who had been permanently separated, with some members in Hokkaido and others on Honshu. It was common for people to have a cousin they couldn't see anymore, and lots of my classmates had grandparents in Ezo. I personally had an uncle who'd gone

missing during the fighting over the North-South split.

The gritty reality was right in front of me, whether I wanted to see it or not—so maybe I'd absorbed the recent history by osmosis.

There was one more thing: the tower.

Let me tell you about that tower.

First of all, I liked it.

It was already standing in the middle of Ezo when I was born, and that distant view had been a constant in my childhood.

If you looked north from the town where I grew up—which didn't really qualify as "a town"—you'd see it, far away in Hokkaido, thin and white, like a mechanical pencil lead stretching to infinity.

Even now, in memory, it strikes me as a strange sight. I never got over it, despite seeing it every single day.

It was tall to the point of absurdity. If you started at the base, you could trace your eyes up it, on and on, watching it grow thin and distant until it finally vanished into the haze. It didn't have a top. I mean, it must have had one, technically, but you couldn't see it.

When I was little, I often imagined that the tower stretched all the way into outer space and linked with another planet. You couldn't say it didn't.

On the Tsugaru Peninsula, anyplace you could see the sky, you could always see the tower to the north. It was a constant presence, like the sun and the moon and the clouds and the stars.

If there was one thing that set it apart from the celestial bodies, it was that it was unmistakably man-made, and if you wanted to physically go to it, you could...technically. Since it was on territory claimed by a foreign country that was in the middle of a tense military situation, getting there would be no small feat.

Even so, I wanted to go there—to that tower.

One of the reasons the tower sent a thrill through me, and a lot of other people, was the fact that nobody had any idea why it had been built.

This unidentifiable object was overwhelming.

It stirred up a grand sense of adventure in people, or at least it did in me.

Of course, a hugely expensive structure would never have been built simply for the sake of it. There had to be some practical purpose in mind. The Union had made it for a reason.

Something was there. Something terrible. Something we couldn't even begin to imagine.

Or something wonderful, perhaps. Something glorious. Something prodigious that would change everything—

The total lack of information fueled my imagination, and fantasies became aspirations. “I want to go” became “Nothing for it but to go,” which finally vaulted into “I need to go.”

The question “I wonder what's there?” intensified into “Something must be there!” I was sure I'd find it there—something for me. The sort of secret that would turn my world inside out.

I was convinced that I would go to that tower one day; the idea turned into an unshakable conviction. I had the feeling that all the potential I possessed was there. Until I reached it, I wouldn't be able to go anywhere else. Unless I made it there, I'd end up losing all the possibilities that were open to me. I would never become anyone; I was bound by fate, traveling down a road with no turnoffs, deteriorating as the years went by...

Lots of us revered the tower, but I can't imagine there were many others who were that obsessed with it. As I told you, I was convinced of those things.

As it turned out, Takuya was another of the handful of people who thought like I did.

2

It's only a tiny bit, way deep down in my heart, but I think...I still resent Sayuri.

My friendship with Takuya turned awkward because she came into it. All else aside, that's an indisputable fact.

My house was in the Minmaya area of Sotogahama-machi. It was right next to Gikei-ji, the temple that's famous from the legend of Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Takuya's house was in Minmaya, too, pretty close to mine; we lived only a ten-minute walk from each other. Up until we started middle school, though, neither of us even knew the other existed. The school district line ran right between our houses, and we'd gone to separate grade schools.

I went to Minmaya Elementary, and Takuya went to Imabetsu Elementary. So we weren't exactly childhood friends. We technically hung out with each other only during our three years in middle school. In my mind, though, he always occupied a special position, different from my other friends, and that's still true now that I'm past thirty.

Takuya and I ended up in the same class when we started middle school, and that's where we first met.

On the day of the entrance ceremony, everybody in our class must have introduced themselves, one by one, but for some reason, I can't remember anything Takuya said.

What I do remember is that it all started over airplanes. From the very beginning, that was the heart of our connection.

It was before summer vacation, so I think it was June or so. I'd already gotten used to middle-school classes, where a different teacher came in for every subject, and I was bored, so I was reading an aviation magazine beneath my desk.

Suddenly, I felt something light strike the back of my head.

Geez, what?

I looked back with quiet irritation and locked eyes with the guy in the seat behind mine. He had a piece of eraser on his left palm and was just about to flick it at me with the middle finger of his other hand. When he saw me turn around, he grinned.

It was Takuya Shirakawa, and that startled me quite a bit.

There are people who become minor celebrities soon after starting at a new school, even though they haven't done anything particularly eye-catching.

Takuya Shirakawa was that type of guy.

He was good-looking, for one thing, so the girls had quietly started getting crushes on him. Plus, he was calm and mature. His whole aura was magnetic. He was way too good at athletic stuff, and his grades were insanely high. There were rumors that he'd gotten the top score in our year—by a mile—on both the midterms and the practical tests we'd taken soon after school began. When I asked him about it directly, later on, it turned out to be true.

So there really are people who can do literally everything.

The thought startled me, and I was genuinely impressed. But, technically, that was as far as my admiration went.

I am not that type, not by any stretch. I'm good at some things, but when I'm bad at something, I'm completely hopeless. And there are more things I'm lousy at than not. I didn't even try comparing myself with Takuya. We lived in different worlds, different dimensions, even if he was only a desk away.

...And that was the guy who'd started messing with me out of the blue. I had no idea why.

When class ended, Takuya hopped out of his seat and came straight over to me.

"That's about airplanes, right? Let me see."

He pointed at the magazine; the very edge of it was sticking out from my desk.

I said something like "Yeah, sure...," then pulled the thick, side-stitched magazine out of my desk and handed it over. He stood there holding it in one hand, dexterously flipping through the pages with his other hand. *Geez, no matter what he's doing, he looks good doing it.*

"I like forward-swept wings," he said. "I know it's kinda cliché for an aviation fan, but still. They're just not quite what you'd expect, you know? They're fun. Not something you'd see every day."

"Yeah, I get that," I answered. "Like the F-FSW. The photos are way different from the F-16s we're used to, but that's what makes them cool."

“Right. Like the Sukhoi S-37; now that’s an interesting design.”

“Yeah, and the Thunderbird 2.”

“That one’s amazing, for sure.” He laughed. His smile was really friendly. “So the YF-22 and 23: What’s your call there?”

Those were two test planes in competition to become the US Army’s next-gen main aircraft.

“Maybe the 23,” I answered.

“I bet it was the V-tail.”

“Bingo. How’d you know?”

“Because it did it for me, too.”

By then, I was sure—I could totally be friends with this guy.

“So you really like planes,” he said.

“I make ’em, actually,” I told him. “At home. They’re models, but they do fly.”

“What?! You kidding me?” He looked shocked, and he leaned in startlingly close. “Hey, is that for real? Geez, you shoulda told me! Can I go over and see them today? Like, right now?”

“Right now...? But we’ve got club. Both of us.”

“So then skip,” he answered bluntly. “We can do club stuff every day, but I wanna see your planes. And if I don’t go now, I won’t be as excited later. I really hate it when that happens. It’s fine—just take me over there as soon as school’s out.”

In the end, I skipped the archery club I’d just joined and took Takuya back to my house. It may have been because what he said got to me—*“If I don’t go now, I won’t be as excited later.”*

After all, I knew the feeling well.

I tended to feel unsatisfied unless I took action on an idea right that minute. I couldn’t let ideas rest and mature; when I decided to make something, I couldn’t relax unless I made it immediately, and things like eating and sleep and homework became second, or even third, priority. That habit had resulted in a

whole lot of dumb mistakes, but I'd never considered trying to mend my ways.

At the far end of our garden, there was a wooden shed that we called "the garage," for lack of a better word, although it was falling apart and barely counted as a garage anymore. As I rolled the shutter open—

"Whoa!" Takuya's eyes went round with excitement. "This is so cool!"

"Yeah?" I think I blushed a little. "It's not like I built them all, though."

The garage had originally belonged to my uncle, my dad's big brother. I'd never actually met him, but I felt very close to him. He'd been a rabid aviation fan.

He was an Air Self-Defense Force officer, but he'd gone missing in 1973, during the struggle over the North-South split. That was before I was born. If he wasn't dead, he was probably somewhere in the Union right now.

As a result, my dad had wound up inheriting the house, the garage, and everything in the garage. It was crammed with model planes and radio-controlled versions of various aircraft from all over the world, real components like propellers and canopies and control sticks, blueprints, exploded view diagrams, and the materials for making original models. It even had a lathe, a drill press, and a machine press. To me, it was a treasure trove. Dad didn't have any interest in airplanes, and I was an only child, so I got to have my uncle's legacy literally all to myself.

I'd been playing in there ever since I was little. It was practically my room, to be honest. Of course, it was too drafty to sleep there, but aside from that, I spent a good chunk of my time in it. I could be with my collection all the time that way.

I'd been crazy about planes and model aircraft since before I started grade school. For school craft assignments, I invariably made an airplane; even if there was no assignment, I was working on some sort of airplane pretty much constantly. Papercraft planes and free flight rubber-powered models and featherweight planes, things like that. The finished ones were displayed neatly on a shelf on the wall, so I could pick them up and fly them at will. I made radio-controlled planes from kits, of course, but the thrill soon wasn't enough, and I just diverted the engine and built a plane according to my own original design.

It didn't have an electric motor; it was a powerful thing with a four-stroke engine. That had been just about a year ago, when I was in sixth grade.

"You made these yourself... That's completely nuts."

Takuya stepped inside and glanced around restlessly, his face flushed. He looked like a kid in a toy store. Actually, he probably looked exactly like I did every time I visited the model shop. I never would have expected that. Ordinarily, this guy acted perfectly calm, almost like an adult. I'd just assumed he was as enlightened as a statue of the Buddha. Nothing could catch him off guard or make him lose his cool.

This new side of him was a big shock, and at the same time, it made me feel really close to him.

No, that's not the right way to describe it. I'd developed an incredible liking for the guy.

He walked around the garage as if he felt at home there, pointing at each item in the collection and asking for explanations. I stepped up enthusiastically, of course. I told him when I'd made that, and what I'd thought as I worked on it, or how I'd put so much painstaking care into this one part. How many months I'd taken to build it, and how I'd gotten this or that component, and where from.

I'd been dying to talk with somebody about everything I'd done, for someone to genuinely understand just how incredible the things I'd made were.

I brought out the plane I'd designed and built last year, handed the transmitter to Takuya, and went with him to fly it, using a nearby farm road as a runway. There were only a few houses anywhere near my place, so it was perfect for flying model planes.

The instant it left the ground, we yelled at the exact same time. That elation of flying a plane never gets old, and I'm sure it never will.

It always gives me chills. Those fixed, man-made wings are flying through the sky. No matter how many times I put a plane in the air, no matter how often I see it, it feels strange. It sends a buzzing thrill racing up my spine.

Takuya knew how to pilot it without getting a detailed explanation; he quickly

got the hang of it and started operating it skillfully. The shrill vibration from the tiny engine, high in the air, drifted down to us. A plane you could hold with two hands wheeled lazily through the vaulted sky and the orange-tinted clouds, sometimes high, sometimes low.

On that day, the thin tower in Ezo was clearly visible. Takuya steered the plane north, turning it in tight circles that made it appear as though he was trying to tangle it around the tower.

When I looked up, the atmosphere was dense and clear. The round sky seemed like a lens pulling my heart up and into it.

“What are you making now? What kind are you going to build next?” Takuya asked.

He was sitting on a round stool in front of the drawing table in the garage, and I was doing maintenance on a radio-controlled plane. “Mm...,” I mumbled vaguely. “It’s still in the planning stages, and I haven’t started making it yet. I’m thinking of something a little complicated. I don’t know how to build it, specifically, and I don’t have much chance of getting it off the drawing board.”

“So, what, it’s a secret?”

“It’s not secret—it’s just...” I hesitated. “The thing is, I want to make it transform while it’s in the air.”

“Transform? Like the F-14?”

“Yeah, that’s great, too. But...” I figured he was going to laugh at me, and I considered not saying anything but decided to go for it. “...I want something cool, like the X-wings in *Star Wars*.”

Takuya didn’t laugh, but he did look a little disbelieving. “You think that’s actually gonna fly?”

“I said *like* them. If I made it exactly the same, sure, it wouldn’t fly, but it’s like... What I mean is—wouldn’t it be cool if the shape totally changed while it was in the air?”

“Hmm...”

“I mean, I know there’s no point if the shape change doesn’t do anything for

the aerodynamics. I've got a few ideas bouncing around, but..."

I put the radio-controlled plane back on the shelf, went over to Takuya, and picked up the college-ruled notebook I'd tossed onto the table. It was a scribble book, so I could sketch out ideas when I thought of them. I flipped through it, opened it to the page with notes about the transforming plane, and laid it on the table.

"I've got a few ideas about the design concept. The problem is the control unit. Everything I've tried gets crazy complicated. I really don't think I could make anything like that, so..."

"Hey, gimme a pencil."

Takuya finally snapped out of the trance he'd been in since I showed him the notebook.

I got him a B pencil out of a pen holder, and he rapidly started writing something on a fresh page.

"What are you writing?"

"Just sit tight and wait a sec."

I tried to peek at the notebook, but he covered it with his hand. Guess he was the type who didn't like people watching while he was writing.

"What about something like this?"

After a little while, he pushed the notebook over to me, and I was finally able to get a look at what was in it.

It startled me.

What he'd sketched were ideas for a control system that would make my design a reality. The freehand, off-the-cuff sketch was short on details, and at first glance, it looked like a doodle. However, as I read through the notes he'd added with arrows, I realized the design was both novel and fairly practical. The shape would change during flight, and the mechanism would move the center of gravity for stability. It was a truly elegant system.

I didn't say anything for a few minutes, then looked at his face steadily.

“...If I really tackle this, I may actually be able to build it.”

“Yeah, 'cause I made it that way,” Takuya said, as if that was nothing.

It was a shock, to put it very mildly. I knew I had the skills in this field, and I had always thought there weren't many adult model-builders who could compete with me, let alone people my age. I'd been completely stumped by this problem for a month or two—and he'd gone and solved it in seconds.

“Who are you?” I finally asked, astonished.

“My dad does this sort of stuff; design-related work on machines. I grew up around it, so I just picked it up. I've started cutting metal on my own, too. Not to brag, but that tech school robot contest would be a cinch for me.”

“Whoa...” That was a word he'd said several times today, and now it was my turn. “What're you, a genius?”

“You could say that.” Takuya's proud expression dissolved into a grin.

After I stopped oohing and ahing, I noticed something.

“It's just...,” I said.

“Yeah, that's the thing.”

There was one problem with Takuya's idea. Naturally, he'd already seen it.

I drew a deep breath.

“It'll be almost impossible to shrink a system this complicated down to model scale.”

“Exactly.”

The idea he'd written down was too advanced, the required precision too great, and it really wasn't the sort of thing you could make model-sized.

“So it would work on an actual plane...” I made that comment casually, then flinched at what I'd just said.

“Right. If you're really going to make this, it should be a real plane. Put a computer on board and have it do the control work,” Takuya said as if that was obvious.

A real plane... I realized something surprising then. Never once had it occurred to me to make a real plane, or even to want to make one someday. Weird.

Someday I'll make a real plane...

Right, of course. I could do that. The thought made me more excited than I'd ever been before. It was intoxicating.

"So here's a question." Takuya interrupted my thoughts.

I shook my head to clear it, then looked at him.

"Yeah?"

"The cultural festival is right after summer vacation. Want to make something together by then?"

"Yeah, I like it."

It was a good idea. I think I was probably a little tired of deciding things by myself and working on them alone.

"What sort of something, though?" I asked.

"Well"—he grinned—"something neither of us has ever made before."

3

What we decided to make was a radio-controlled jet. All the aircraft I'd made before had been prop planes, and I'd never made anything that used a model jet engine.

When I mentioned it, Takuya pointed at me and said, "That's it."

"But model jet engines are insanely expensive. They're over a million yen, easy. Even the used ones are several hundred thousand."

"I know that already." Takuya was unperturbed.

"Then what are we gonna do?"

"We don't have to buy one. We just have to get one from somewhere, right?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Where would we get it? How?"

“Just let me handle it. I’ve got an idea.”

A few days later, on Sunday, Takuya actually brought the engine over to my place. He even had a small tank filled with aircraft fuel on the cargo rack of his bike. The engine wasn’t new; there were marks that showed it had been used, but it was an excellent one, a product from a brand-name manufacturer in West Germany. It was one I was always staring at catalog photos of and sighing over.

I patted and stroked it for quite a long time, enjoying the feel of the cold metal, gazing at it from every possible angle, drinking in its functional beauty. The pungent smell of the fuel enchanted me, too. When I ran a finger around the rim of its air intake, I felt an electric thrill. I never knew something like this could exist, something so beautiful and pleasant to touch... I got pretty close to forgetting that time was passing and that Takuya was right next to me.

After spending a while like that, I suddenly turned to Takuya.

“But how did you get it?”

He looked a little uncomfortable. “Um. Well, uh... You want to know?”

“Hey. Spit it out.”

“I don’t mind telling you, but I think you probably shouldn’t ask. If you know, you’ll feel guilty using it.”

“You mean...”

Apparently, Takuya’s acquisition methods had not been aboveboard.

I think my reaction was pretty mixed. Takuya’s voice was cheerful, and he didn’t sound at all ashamed.

“Hey, it’s fine. After all, it’s here now. You know it would rather be flying than lying around unused.”

He knocked lightly on the engine. That clinched it for me, and I didn’t press the issue any further.

Something that got clearer and clearer to me later was that Takuya was a bit of a troublemaker, nothing like what you’d expect from his usual honor-student attitude... Although, I didn’t know if that was how he genuinely was or whether it was some sort of act.

There were several examples, one of which was that he smoked, and quite heavily given that he was just in his first year of middle school.

“It gets stressful, being the perfect kid all the time. Pretend you didn’t see this.”

We were measuring the engine together when he told me that; he was smoking a cigarette, although he didn’t seem to be enjoying it much. The people around him didn’t have a clue that he smoked; he never messed up. But when he was with me, he’d relax and burn through several cigs in a row.

Thanks to that, I had to pay quite a lot of attention to how my hair and clothes smelled so my parents and teachers wouldn’t get suspicious.

“You know those irons with a steam function, the ones that get wrinkles out of suits? If you use one of those, it gets rid of the smoke smell completely,” he’d once told me. Taking Takuya’s recommendation, I diligently used my dad’s steam iron on my shirts and trousers every day. For the three years I hung out with Takuya, my clothes were neat and wrinkle-free.

“I guess honor students don’t have it as easy as you’d think, huh...?” I sighed with utter sincerity. “I still kinda wanna be one, though. I wouldn’t mind taking on a little stress.”

“I call BS.” Takuya stuck a butt into an empty oolong tea can and smiled cynically. “Get a load of you. You don’t think that at all.”

“What? I do so.”

“Nah, you don’t. I can tell,” Takuya declared, sounding plenty confident. Then all of a sudden, he said, “Personally, I’m jealous of *you*.”

I wasn’t sure how to reply. “Me? Why?”

“You just do whatever you want with your life. You’re so matter-of-fact. It feels like you’re just you, and you don’t care what the people around you are doing. I like that. I think guys like me naturally gravitate toward guys like you.”

“Huh...”

He’d gotten very passionate during the speech, and his mood was contagious.

“Everyone’s always got their eye on me, you know? And it’s bad enough that

some people won't like it."

"Yeah."

I gave him an honest answer. He really did tend to attract attention, no matter what he was doing.

"The way people look at you, what they think of you—you start feeling jerked around. Like everyone's relying on you for a million things at once, until you can't just be yourself. It's tougher than you'd think."

"Hrmm..."

I grunted a bit. I'd never heard anything like that before. People live in all kinds of worlds. You might be in the same sphere with someone, even in the same school, but it really doesn't feel the same when your positions are different.

"So ever since we started school, I've had an eye on you. I wanted to know more about you, but I was too scared. Too much pressure. Like, if I take my eyes off you just because you're quiet, you'll end up doing something huge all of a sudden. Makes you nervous, y'know?"

"Hmm. I see."

I'd drifted back to the engine and started working as I muttered responses. Meanwhile, I was feeling thoroughly impressed.

Takuya was telling me about his weaknesses with as little affectation as if he was talking about the weather. It gave me an odd feeling I'd never felt before.

His casual, frank way of talking energized me, too.

I'm a simple guy—or at least not complicated. At his age, he was consciously playing to the expectations of others in some situations and acting like his true self to get through life. To me, the existence of such a person was a shock, plain and simple. It was so new.

Takuya really was fascinating.

"Smoking's bad for you, though," I offered, because I'd felt like I had to say something.

As he lit a new cigarette, Takuya looked somewhat annoyed. Then he abruptly leaned forward and blew smoke in my face.

“What are you doing?!”

Coughing, I waved my hand to disperse the cloud, and Takuya laughed.

“It’s fine. Let’s get lung cancer and die together.”

The two of us could have chosen an existing scale model airplane or a similar, orthodox airframe configuration.

If we had, we would have been sure it would fly. I’d gone through quite a lot of trouble to study aerodynamics on my own, and I’d even designed and flown original planes before. On that point, I was confident. The wonderful thing about airplanes is that if you design them to fly, then build them exactly according to the design, they’ll always, always fly. If they don’t, it’s either because the design was flawed or because your building skills weren’t up to it.

I was good at both. If I built it the way I usually did, it would fly, no questions asked. Which may have been why I was just a bit bored with the idea. I wanted an adventure.

Plus, it was only natural for something that looked like an airplane to fly. I wanted something bizarre to fly. I wanted to build something that had a chance of failure.

“What about a flying wing?” Takuya opened *Aviation Fan* and pointed to a photo. “Like this one. Doesn’t it seem sort of unexpected, like a UFO?”

“The shape is fun. It looks like it’d actually fly pretty easily, though.”

“You’re kind of a pain, aren’t you?” Takuya opened one eye wide with weary amazement. “You want it to fly without looking like it’ll fly.”

“I mean, c’mon. It’s boring if you already know what’s gonna happen.”

“You’re full of yourself.” His lips barely moved as he spoke, because he was holding a cig between them. “I know what you mean, though.”

“You do? Really?”

“Of course I do,” he said. “I want it, too. Something you’ve never seen before.

Something you don't know yet. Something you've never experienced. Sensations you've never felt. The unknown is the only thing in the whole world that has any real value."

"Look at you and your cool one-liners."

"What about a ring wing?"

"A closed wing, huh...?"

I thought about it. Closed-wing planes have main wings that are shaped like a ring, or a tube. Since the wings don't have tips, wingtip drag doesn't happen. You can get away with using less area compared to flat wings, so when you first look at it, they're so small you wonder if they could actually get off the ground. It might be shaped more like a rocket, for example. But...

"That sounds like too much work," I said. I didn't mean to say it aloud.

"That's what you want, right?" Takuya pounced on the comment. "That settles it, then."

And so, that day, we started drafting the plans. At the time, Takuya didn't know a whole lot about aerodynamics, but when I loaned him three technical books, he read them all in a night and quickly caught up to the point where building models wasn't a problem for him. I'd spent a long time learning all of that, and he'd crammed it all into a single night. Brilliant people have so much latent power. It lit a fire under me that was not too far from fear, but it was great to have a friend on the same level that I could talk to. It was the first time in my life I'd seen somebody my age who could handle a lathe or a milling machine as well as I could.

"That's because we've got similar stuff at my house, and I've liked making things since I was a kid. It's a miracle I've still got all ten fingers."

He looked at me and grinned, and I smiled back involuntarily. That happens when you sympathize way too much. I should've lost a finger or two by now, too.

The aerodynamic design really was a pain in the butt, but we did it together, and we found out how to make it work. Naturally, neither of us was content to simply have it fly. Unless it flew well and looked cool doing it, it wasn't even

worth discussing. We went back and forth, sketching all sorts of ideas on paper, and by the time we finally managed to draft a plan we were satisfied with, July was already over.

We used carbon fiber and aircraft balsa for the body. We'd chosen those materials for several reasons, but the biggest one was that we had tons of both at my place. I was so grateful to my uncle I'd never met.

Making something with somebody was fun.

Over summer vacation, we made the airplane in the garage, working in silence. We cut shapes out of the materials and sandpapered them without saying a word, our faces intent. When you're really focused on making something, you can't hear anything else, and you completely forget to speak.

Still, I sensed my partner with something that wasn't my eyes or ears. I don't know how Takuya felt. I did think it would be nice if he was in the same boat, and I bet he was.

When we took breaks, we talked about ourselves. Our families, for example, and stories about random people in our class, and TV shows we'd watched a long time ago. Dumb stuff.

From time to time, we'd give the work a rest and take the train into Aomori City to go blow off steam. We'd shop, have lunch at the eateries in the station building, and swim in the pool. When you go out on the town with someone you've just made friends with, you tend to get all keyed up, but I didn't feel even a little of that. It was as if I'd been friends with Takuya for years. Being there with him felt right.

By August 20, when the short Tohoku summer vacation ended, we'd finished most of the body. The cultural festival was on September 25, and we spent the month until then painting, making fine adjustments, and performing engine maintenance.

We painted the aircraft a vivid blue.

"Blue looks the fastest," Takuya said.

"Huh," I replied, impressed. Hearing it from him, I assumed there would be some sort of scientific or psychological basis for it. When I asked him to explain,

though, the answer was disappointing.

“No, no, it’s just how it looks to me.”

Blue is a good color, though. I love the blue of the JASDF’s Blue Impulse planes.

Both Takuya and I agreed that we weren’t going to do a test flight before the main attempt. When you already know the plane’s going to fly right, a public flight is just a boring show. Both for the audience and for us.

What we wanted to do, and to show other people, was something that wasn’t a foregone conclusion.

But if you asked me whether it would fly or not, I would’ve said yes, a hundred percent. I had absolute confidence in that. After all, we’d built it together: me and Takuya.

4

It’s nothing to brag about, but I’m a rain man, and I’ve been making it rain (or snow) on field trips and sports days since forever. That year, though, it was nice and sunny for the cultural festival. It was so bright and clear, literally not a cloud in the sky. The whole sky was a blue that was nearly too blue, the kind that sticks in your memories of summer.

In the morning, on the short trip from Minami-Yomogita Station to school, I gazed up at that sky and drew a deep breath. The area around our school was dotted with small tracts of mixed forest; other than that, there was nothing but rice paddies, farm fields, and a few houses. The only mountains were low ones in the distance. When the sky was blue, it felt unbelievably vast. Both the place and the weather were ideal for flying our project. A red dragonfly flew past at about eye level, and as my gaze followed it, I took a deep, calming breath.

Even though there was still half an hour before homeroom started, Takuya was in the classroom already.

“You’re late, Hiroki.”

“No, I’m not. You’re early.”

Around us, a couple of students were making adjustments to the decorations in the classroom. Our class had decided to do a run-of-the-mill, ticket-based, traditional Japanese sweets café. Takuya came closer and spoke to me in a voice too quiet for the others to hear.

“I already finished assembling the plane.”

“Huh?! Already? Geez, what time did you get here?”

“About an hour ago. I was feeling kind of restless.”

We’d taken the plane apart and brought it to school, little by little, starting several days ago. We’d also brought a set of tools and the fuel, of course.

There was an unused wooden storage shed in a corner of the school grounds, and although there was no telling how he’d done it, Takuya had swiped the key to it from the faculty room. Sand had gotten into the shed and left grit all over everything, but he’d said it was a convenient place to smoke, since no one would notice him in there. That was where we’d hidden the airplane.

What we were going to do was a complete secret, both from the school and from our classmates. This was a guerrilla project.

We definitely had to keep it a secret from the teachers. They were bound to give us a hard time about safety considerations and whatnot—if worse came to worst, they might forbid it altogether. Both Takuya and I were really not fond of having adults stick their oars in, and this was doubly true if the adults were amateurs who didn’t know a thing about planes. We wouldn’t let other people control us.

We’d built it ourselves, and we wanted control of it ourselves. When it came to that feeling, Takuya and I were in such close agreement that we could have been twins.

When homeroom ended and the beginning of the cultural festival was announced, Takuya and I got our shifts at the class café out of the way ASAP. We dashed out of the classroom, ignoring all the attractions, split up the way we’d discussed beforehand, and got to work on the preparations.

We’d planned to act at 1:00 PM, but since the assembly work was already done, we moved the time up by an hour.

I got the key from Takuya, went to the storage shed, and carefully checked over the assembled airplane, making sure there weren't any defects. Back when we were building it, we'd made a point of each checking the parts the other was working on. Takuya would look at what I'd made, and I'd look at what he'd made. There were no problems whatsoever. He'd put it together beautifully. I powered it up and did an inspection, working the movable parts—the ailerons and elevators and retractable landing gear. The landing gear lagged a little, so I adjusted it.

Then I fired up the jet engine to get it warm.

It was a dangerous thing to do inside such a small wooden building, but there was no way around it. The air rapidly grew hot and stifling. The smell of exhaust was thickening in the room, too, so I cracked open the door. The storage shed had been shoddily built, and drafts blew in from several places; right now, I was grateful.

Meanwhile, Takuya was getting the runway ready.

The area behind our middle school's main building had been paved with asphalt and was used as a staff parking lot. This was the country, so there was enough space for it to feel relatively empty.

A private road stretched straight from the back of that parking lot. It was only ever used by people who had business at the school.

Takuya had bought some yellow-and-black vinyl rope at a home center on one of our trips into Aomori City, and he stretched this down the center of the parking lot, restricting traffic. He was making sure no people or cars cut across the straight line we were using as a runway.

He'd prepared the runway to lead straight into the private road. According to our calculations, the space in the parking lot would be enough for takeoff, but if something came up, we'd use the private road to buy ourselves some distance. Later on, I learned that conscientious Takuya had picked up a striped construction barrier from a work site somewhere, put it across the end of that road, considerately made a sign on a piece of veneer that read ROAD CLOSED FOR CULTURAL FESTIVAL, and leaned the sign against it. I cracked up when I found out. It took a lot of guts to lie like that.

“You’d be surprised what you can get away with if you just act like you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. Nobody ever suspects.”

That was what Takuya had told me back when we were planning this, when I’d said that somebody was bound to notice and call us on it if we restricted traffic.

“That’s why I’m in charge of the runway. When you don’t have a clear conscience, you always give it away.”

He was right, so I’d agreed and gone along with his plan.

Takuya’s poker face worked wonders. When I reached the back of the school building, carrying the plane and transmitter and toolbox under my arms, he’d finished the runway without anyone asking questions.

“This is the starting line,” Takuya said, tracing an invisible line on the asphalt with the rubber sole of his shoe. I gently set the plane on it and ignited the engine to get it warmed up again.

A transparent flame, neither red nor blue, heated the air until it was shimmering. From time to time, the smell of burning jet fuel reached my nose, and I tensed up in spite of myself.

Of course, we were attracting attention now. Little by little, a crowd was gathering, including teachers. They were relaxed about the whole thing, apparently unaware that this was an unauthorized event... Or maybe they had realized, and they were just being nice and pretending they hadn’t.

“Hey, is that a rocket?” a kid we knew from class asked.

“Uh, no. It’s a plane.”

“It don’t got wings, though.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Is it supposed to fly? Or is this a joke?”

“Just shut up and watch,” I snapped. “Takuya, let’s do it now.” I was cracking under the pressure.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

Spreading his arms, Takuya started herding the audience back. I picked up the transmitter I'd set down earlier, extended the antenna, and lightly shifted the control stick. I felt the servos inside the plane come to life, and the ailerons and elevators moved, as if the plane was stretching out to get ready. That was enough to draw a little cheer from the crowd.

I took a deep breath. "Here we go."

"Let her rip."

I pushed the throttle lever up.

The tiny jet engine pushed off against the air.

The plane began racing along in a straight line. A shrill, metallic sound scratched at my eardrums. We'd made the airframe light, and it vibrated with every little bump and dip in the asphalt as it rolled along. It made me nervous, but I knew easing up on the throttle was not an option at this point. I kept holding the lever down with my thumb for dear life.

Suddenly, the plane rose lightly on a cushion of air, and my heart soared with it.

I took the plane higher.

The power of this thing was on a whole different level from the prop planes I was used to controlling. It was just plain fast. I made it wheel, then called it back toward me. It responded more sensitively than I'd expected, which made me a little jumpy.

The usual shiver climbed up my spine and spread all through me, making every cell tingle.

I took it across the roof of the school building, then made it sketch three big circles in the sky.

That was about when the voices and noises around me finally started to register again.

When I took a quick glance around, everyone was looking up at the sky like a bunch of idiots. It was hilarious. People leaned out of second-and third-floor windows in the school building to watch, too. We'd attracted quite a lot of

attention.

I got the urge to see our plane flying up close, so I sent it sweeping low enough to almost brush the ground. It flashed past in an instant, leaving a Doppler-warped engine scream in our ears.

Ahhh.

It's that feeling again.

How can I even describe it? Would the people around me understand it?

It feels as if there's two of me. Like I'm both here on the ground and slicing through the air above as a plane. I'm not controlling the plane—I'm me *and* the plane. For these little moments, I'm holding two possibilities inside me. Half of me is racing through the sky, and the other half has his feet planted on the ground. As I look up at myself flying, I'm also looking down at myself standing on the ground. The split feels good; it's a multilayered version of myself. We're constantly sharing our emotions with each other. It really is a unique experience. I'm not pretending to be something else, and I haven't become one with anything. The only way I can describe the experience is to say that I've split off a part of myself as a separate possibility.

My two selves felt intoxicated in two different ways.

"Hey, don't space out," Takuya's voice called. "Let me have my turn."

I stabilized the plane, then got into position to hand off the transmitter.

There's a bit of a knack to handing over a transmitter while the plane is in the air. I held it out to Takuya, who was next to me, keeping the control stick firmly in place with my finger. Takuya put his finger above mine, holding the stick down. Gently, one hand at a time, I let go. We did all this in an instant. We'd practiced it over and over beforehand, so we were able to do it smoothly.

After my fingers left the transmitter, I felt a bit dazed.

Once it was out of my hands, I was finally able to observe the plane from a neutral perspective. Its flight was sharp and precise, nothing like a prop plane, and watching it woke up every cell in my body. Its long, thin, rocket-like airframe pierced through the layers of the wind. I knew instinctively that its

annular wing was slicing the air, like a vegetable peeler. The awe hit me like a chilly wave of almost-embarrassment, as if a layer of skin around my heart had been smoothly peeled off, and the sensation made me break out in goose bumps all over.

I bent back, tipping my face to the sky, and shouted with elation. My voice disappeared beneath the ear-piercing metallic roar of the motor, and the noise had quite a lot of people poking their heads out of windows to watch. Light applause had started around us.

I took the transmitter again, and tension ran through every muscle I had. The clicking of the control stick altered my awareness once again.

I flew the plane for a while. It felt great.

But before long, the sense that something wasn't quite right began to coil around me.

I couldn't have described what was wrong—it was just that under-the-weather feeling, like when you have a cold coming on.

It took me a few moments to realize that it was because the plane wasn't responding as well as it had earlier.

"Hey, I think something's wrong," Takuya said just before the engine sputtered.

"Shoot!"

Hastily, I tried to bring the plane down, to reel it back in, but it was already too late. The engine stalled. The plane had been on the other side of the school building just then, and it fell down behind it and disappeared.

We heard a crash.

"The gym!"

Takuya and I yelled and took off running at the exact same time.

We sprinted around the school building and came out on the side with the athletic field, near the gym. We guessed the plane had hit a wall or a window. We went all the way around the gym, looking up at the walls. The plane wasn't there.

From a distance, we heard somebody calling our names. Several people had poked their heads out of windows on the third floor of the school building and were pointing at the roof of the gym.

“Oh, come on! Up there?!”

I ran toward the building. I could feel Takuya following me. I ran through the main entrance and up the stairs to the third floor, taking the steps three at a time, then I bolted into a nearby classroom. It just happened to be an unused one. Our school was in a depopulated area, so it had a lot of empty classrooms.

Diving for a window, I leaned out.

Our plane had caught on the curve of the gym’s rounded roof.

The blue plane was strangely picturesque against the aqua-colored tin.

It was as if the roof was a waterslide at a pool, and the plane was poised to slide off it at any moment. Its soft nose had crumpled, snagging on the roof and sparing the rest of it from slamming into the ground.

“AAaaaAAaaaaaAAaaah...”

Takuya and I whined in near-perfect unison.

For a few seconds after that, we gazed at the airplane in dazed silence.

Before long, the humor of the situation hit us.

An incomprehensible amusement worked its way up from the depths of my stomach. I was a little bewildered, and my cheeks tensed as I bit back the urge to laugh. For no particular reason, I looked over at Takuya. He was making the same face.

At almost the same moment, we choked and cracked up.

Our laughter was soundless for a little while, our sides twitching, but before long, we couldn’t take it anymore. We howled with laughter. This was no time to be laughing, but we couldn’t help it. Takuya leaned against the aluminum window frame and I leaned against a desk, both of us doubled over and laughing until we could barely breathe.

“Ahhhh...”

Exhausted, Takuya sighed. Then he said:

“We are the best team ever.”

In all thirteen years of my life, I had never felt so content and close to anyone.

After that, Takuya and I got called to the faculty room and were read the riot act. Our teacher told us never to do something that dangerous without permission again. Later, in the middle of the night, we sneaked back into the school, climbed up onto the gym, and retrieved the plane before the rain could get it. Or a teacher.

5

Whenever I think about Sayuri, there are several scenes that invariably play out in my mind.

One is a memory of seeing her at Minami-Yomogita Station.

Minami-Yomogita was the closest train station to our middle school. It was pretty big for the Tsugaru Line, but it had only two platforms, and there was just one ticket gate, on the inbound platform. To get to the outbound platform, you had to go up, cross the prefab pedestrian bridge that spanned the tracks and linked the two platforms, then go down again.

The view from the platform consisted of houses and rice paddies and mixed forest. It was the sort of local, underfunded station you see all over the country. There was a wooden waiting room in front of the ticket gate with a stove that was kept glowing in winter. Classic “snow country” stuff, I guess.

Except for the kids who rode their bikes to school, almost all the students at our school commuted through this station. I say “almost all,” but it was a rural middle school, so the numbers still weren’t anything to write home about. Takuya and I spent forty minutes every day getting from our houses to this station’s platform. So did Sayuri.

I’m pretty sure it was near the end of our second year of middle school—a year and a half after the radio-controlled jet incident. I can’t remember the exact date, but I think it was probably a couple days before spring break

started.

The students at our school called the train that left after 3:30 the “going-straight-home train,” and the one that left after 5:00 the “club train.” Takuya and I took the club train. Takuya was in the speed skating club, I was in the archery club, and we were both fairly enthusiastic participants.

Every day, when it was time to catch the train, Takuya and I met in the same place on the platform, boarded through the same door, and took over the same box seat. No matter how cold it was, there was an unspoken rule that we’d wait on the platform instead of going into the waiting room. When one of us stood on the platform, the other could see him even from outside the station.

That evening, I was waiting for the train and Takuya on the station’s outbound platform, just like always. The weather was clear, and I tucked my chin into the collar of my bomber jacket, which I’d put on over my uniform. The orange of the setting sun was eroding the blue sky, and my white breath dispersed slowly as the wind carried it away.

A group of girls came in through the ticket gate, chattering noisily, and I glanced at them.

I’d heard Sayuri’s voice.

I focused squarely on her but then looked away almost immediately to keep up appearances. Even so, I kept her in the corner of my vision the whole time.

“How much longer?”

“There’s still time.”

I imagined the conversation with her friends. After all, the number of trains was kept to the absolute minimum, so if you just barely missed one, the damage was astronomical.

Back then, Sayuri wore her hair in pigtails. It was a plain style, but it suited her. That day, I’m pretty sure she was wearing a thick duffle coat over her winter uniform, and a loosely wound muffler—

And she was laughing cheerfully with her friends.

That part was unusual, which is why I remember it so well.

Although Sayuri's group had passed through the ticket gate, once they'd checked to make sure the train wasn't here yet, they promptly retreated into the waiting room. I gave a small sigh of relief, letting the tension drain out of me.

As if taking their place, I heard rhythmic footsteps coming down from the pedestrian bridge. It was Takuya. He was holding two cans of coffee that he'd bought from the hot-drink vending machine, one in each hand, and from time to time, he'd toss them into the air to give his skin a reprieve from the heat. As he stepped down onto the platform, he threw one of the cans to me. When I caught it, the can was pretty hot against my frigid fingers, and I almost dropped it. We'd had a small bet the day before, and the coffee was the prize.

Takuya raised his can to his lips, gazing absently at the opposite platform.

"Hiroki, when are you going to work again?"

"Oh. Uh, let's see..."

Currently, we were working part-time on the sly, without telling the school like we were supposed to.

"Club activities end tomorrow. Maybe the day after that, then. What about you?"

"Tomorrow's morning practice is the last one for me, too. Okay. The day after tomorrow it is."

"Sure thing."

As a rule, students at our middle school retired from their clubs at the end of their second year. The public reason was so that we could focus on our high school entrance exams. However, Takuya and I had been spending our spare hours working part-time. Up till now, we'd only been able to work on the weekends, but starting the day after tomorrow, we'd have a long holiday in addition to the break in club. We'd be making money hand over fist.

We weren't really worried about the exams. Everyone knew Takuya's grades were good, and mine weren't all that bad, either. Besides, as long as I got into high school, anywhere would be fine. Or at least, that's what I thought then.

We discussed a few things about how we'd get to work, then quietly waited for the train. Neither of us was a talkative type, so we often spent our time together in silence.

The arrival announcement played, and I leaned forward a little to see the train's headlight, small with distance, far down the straight track. The train slowly grew bigger, slid wearily into the platform, and creaked to a stop. Through the windows on both sides of the train, I saw Sayuri's group hurry through the ticket gate on the opposite platform. Unconsciously, I listened carefully to the sound of their footsteps as they ran, scrambling up the pedestrian bridge, then back down again.

I heard the *clang* of Takuya's empty can as he lobbed it into the wastebasket, then realized I still had half my coffee left. I chugged the rest in a hurry, then tossed the can underhanded. It very nearly bounced off the rim of the basket, but it ultimately dropped inside.

When I turned back, I caught sight of Sayuri out of the corner of my eye; she and her friends were just boarding the train, jostling each other a little. "I'm going to leave you behind," Takuya called to me, and I scrambled for the door.

Just before I boarded, I looked up at the red sky.

Over the roof of the train, I could see that tower, wreathed with thin clouds. It was faintly red, piercing into the round sky. Maybe I was drawn exclusively to things I could only watch and couldn't ever have.

Takuya and I took over a box seat, rudely putting our feet up on the opposite bench. It was the seat we always used, one we'd chosen for no real reason, and the way we always sat. Takuya was reading a magazine about Mac computers. I killed time by reading the *Jump* magazine I bought every week, one day late.

We were usually silent on the train, too. Not talking was natural for us. Sometimes I see people who can't stand silence without conversation, and I always wonder what they're so nervous about. With Takuya, the quiet made me feel at ease. Just the rhythm and snippets of faraway conversations around me. The way the world outside faded until the surrounding houses disappeared into pitch-black darkness and the way my hazy face reflected in the mirror of the window glass were parts of my world. All within reach. They were familiar to

me, protecting me.

On that day, though, I stiffened as something like a ripple of unease interjected itself. At first, I didn't understand what it was. Before long, the ripple surfaced in my mind as a single voice.

The voice was Sayuri's. I'd picked her out of the ambient conversation as she chatted with her friends. The other girls' voices were too muffled to hear. Only Sayuri's voice reached my mind, sharp and clear. In the midst of the white noise, I listened to her with a sort of cringing restlessness. I didn't know what to do.

I tried to immerse my mind in the calming darkness beyond the window. Then I saw Takuya's face reflected in the glass. His eyes were still on his magazine, but his face was tense in a way that wasn't like him.

He's listening to her, too...

I knew what was going to happen with near certainty. Something potent and bitter thrust its way upward within me, and my chest constricted. My jaw clenched.

An unwarranted sense of defeat formed inside me. Most of it was due to the fact that Takuya was cool, and girls liked him a lot more than they liked me.

...But of course that wasn't all it was.

6

The next day, after the exhausting, long, and pointless closing ceremony was over, I changed into my tracksuit and went to the archery range. Club activities had ended for me after that morning's practice, but I felt like shooting just a little bit more.

This was a practice that agreed with me.

I was there, and so was the target. I sent my mind flying toward it. When I did, a sharp path formed between the two of us.

In that moment, the sights and sounds around me vanished, creating a world without any kind of static, one that held only me and the target. As if the two of

us had switched places. In that moment, I was the bull's-eye, and the bull's-eye was taking aim at me.

That instant was so clear and crisp.

Then there was a dry *thud*, and I'd realize that I'd struck the distant target.

It didn't always go that well, of course. There were times when the static didn't vanish—and other times when the path didn't form straight and true. Those shots weren't nearly as beautiful.

Recently, I'd been completely hopeless. Something rough and scratchy in my mind was constantly making jagged edges in my reflexes. The techniques I'd learned were physically ingrained in me, so the arrows did hit home to a certain extent. But that sensation of clarity wouldn't come.

My focus ran out, and I'd just given up and crouched down right where I was when I realized Takuya was peeking in at me through the archery range window.

"I came to watch. You're finishing up?"

"No... Taking a break. I'm really out of it today."

We bought two triangle packs of coffee milk at the school co-op, which was just about to close, then sat down by the drinking fountain near the athletic field.

"You retired, and you're still practicing? You must really be into it." Takuya jabbed the straw into his drink.

"I'm not doing it because I care. How was yours?"

"My what?"

"Your club this morning. It was your last practice, so they must have made a big deal out of it. Did they make you say a few words to the group at a meeting?"

"Yeah, they did." Then he casually dropped a little bombshell on me. "And in honor of this momentous occasion, a girl told me she liked me."

"Whoa, dude, again?!"

“Yeah.”

Takuya told me indifferently about what had happened. Just as he was leaving, a group of three girls had stopped him, and a junior club member, Matsuura, had given him a letter...more or less. Of course, he wasn't the type of guy who would have gone around telling everybody. The only time he talked about this stuff was when it was just the two of us. He wasn't bragging at all. To him, it was nothing to brag about in the first place.

I sighed. “Lucky duck. How many does that make?”

“You're acting like it's a whole bunch. Counting from April, she's the second one.”

“Uh-huh, and that's too many.”

“Well, yeah, maybe.”

Takuya rummaged in the pocket of his trousers and pulled out his lighter. I knew he was about to light up out of habit, so I kicked his shoe with my toe. Realizing we were still at school, he took his hand out of his pocket.

“And?” I said.

“Huh?”

“You turned her down? ...Like before?”

“Yeah.”

I started blowing bubbles in my pack of milk. “Man, what might have been. It was the Matsuura from year one, class two, right? She's cute... She would've been a great girlfriend.”

I didn't mean anything by it. Thinking about it now, though, I might have been unconsciously trying to sound Takuya out.

“Hey, do you actually think that?”

Out of nowhere, he was on the offensive, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Well, yeah. She's really popular, you know? And you turned her down. Normally, that wouldn't even happen.”

“Who cares about normal?” He clicked the lighter in his hand, over and over.

“What about you, then? Why don’t you go out with her?” he said abruptly.

“Huh? How’d we get from that to this?”

“Would you date her, if it was you?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that.

“Kana Matsuura is cute, sure. Stays out of trouble. But that doesn’t mean I have to go out with her, does it?”

“Hmm...”

“I don’t think that’s how it’s supposed to be. Who cares if she would’ve been a good girlfriend? Am I right, Hiroki?”

“...Yeah, you’re right,” I answered quietly.

What he was saying made total sense. On the other hand, what I’d said was awfully clichéd and cheap.

“So listen,” he said, leaning in. “You should go out with Matsuura.”

“No, no, no. Look, why me?”

“Not the one for you, either, huh? Hmm. Then who would be?”

In that moment, Sayuri’s face surfaced in my mind, and I hastily tried to think about something else. I stammered.

“Uh... Well, um.”

“C’mon, what? Use your words.”

Takuya was wearing the smirk he wore when he was plotting something. That clued me in. He was getting me back for asking him leading questions earlier. Faltering, I reached for an answer that intentionally missed the point.

“I mean...I’m not saying Matsuura isn’t good enough. Plus, she is cute... But c’mon, I don’t even know what you’re supposed to do when you’re dating, or how. So I mean...I’m good. Really. Okay?”

Takuya snorted with amusement and clicked his lighter. Then, when he’d had enough fun watching me fumble for my answer, he turned to me and whispered, “Hey. She didn’t tell *you* she liked you.”

“You’re the one who brought it up!”

“Ha-ha-ha! I got you good!” Takuya laughed, while I sulked.

That conversation was as dumb as most of the others we had, so we were able to just laugh it off. However, thinking about it later, the subject was pretty risky.

Takuya was popular and cool, and he had that aura about him. But if that was all he had going for him, there wouldn’t have been anything to worry about. The trouble was that he was a *good* guy. He had his head on straight—an important and rare quality.

It was also likely that he was attracted to Sayuri. And he had so much going for him, and he was approaching it the right way. He wasn’t trying to cover it up, nor was he saying things he didn’t mean just to navigate the situation, the way I was.

I really did like him for that. I liked him a hell of a lot.

I’m pretty good with people, which means I can make friends with practically anybody. There were people I went out and had fun with, both in class and elsewhere, and I was constantly goofing around with them. But the time I spent with Takuya was something completely different, something special.

There was an exceptional bond between us, and I didn’t want to damage it. Those feelings were stronger than my attraction to Sayuri.

At least, back then they were.

I could feel a day coming when those scales would tip the other way, and the idea terrified me.

And that wasn’t all.

Takuya was sharp. He’d probably already realized that I liked Sayuri.

The dangerous tension in our team was already there.

*

Takuya and I first met Sayuri Sawatari when we were in our second year of middle school.

Technically, the school was pretty small, so we’d heard of her before then.

We just never came in contact with her. Up until that point, she was just a name with a face in our year, not even an acquaintance. The only chance we had to get to know girls from other classes was during club, and Sayuri was in the music club.

When we moved up to year two, there was a class shuffle. I ended up in a different class from several of the friends I hung out with, and I was bummed about that, but at least I was still in the same class as Takuya. In front of the posted class assignments for the new term, we grinned at each other and bumped fists, like boxers right after the gong.

Sayuri was in that class, too.

She was a very beautiful girl. But I don't think the guys ever talked about how Sawatari was cute, or a babe, or anything like that.

It was more like...Sayuri's beauty was the type that was well hidden inside her. Like music you listen to with headphones, her beauty was complete within her, and it didn't radiate outward. Unless you looked very carefully and paid extremely close attention, you'd never catch the way she shone. She made a good contrast with Takuya, who let his aura shine bright and draw attention no matter what he was doing.

At the time, it really mystified me. Why didn't anyone realize how beautiful she was? A girl straight out of a dream was right there in front of them, so why weren't they talking about it?

That said, I hadn't immediately noticed Sayuri's light myself. I saw it only after a certain small, trivial thing brought us closer and we started talking.

In our year two Modern Japanese textbook, there was a section of Kenji Miyazawa poems. The teacher in charge of that class was a guy named Yoshitsuru, and when we reached that section, he suddenly got so enthusiastic and emphatic that he was practically a different person.

According to him, Kenji Miyazawa was the greatest poet ever, and "it's the duty of any kid who knows Japanese to give every one of Kenji's poems a careful reading." Then he launched into a huge, obsessed lecture. We were just confused. This was a middle-school class, but the guy would print out bulletins from some university or other and make us read them, or put us through mock

seminars. Finally he made us form groups and told us to do joint research projects and submit reports.

Anyway, Takuya, Sayuri, and I ended up doing that report together.

It was just coincidence that we ended up on the same team. Takuya and I had planned to be a team of our own, but Sayuri happened to stay home from school on the day we split into groups. The two of us were the smallest group in the class, so she ended up getting lumped in with us.

“Pretty sure he was a failed lit nerd,” Takuya said, resting his elbows on a library room table. “He” was Yoshitsuru, the Modern Japanese teacher.

“Yeah, I’m sick of it. This is not a middle-school assignment,” I complained right along with him.

Watching us, Sayuri gave a breathy little laugh. “A lot of Kenji Miyazawa’s fans are really intense. There are tons and tons of people who are completely head over heels for him. I hear some of them join the literature club just so they can read Kenji... Although, I didn’t know Mr. Yoshitsuru was one of them.”

“Huh...”

As I listened, I was feeling somewhat flustered.

Sayuri was the only girl in this group, but she wasn’t awkward or timid at all. That was unexpected. I’d always assumed girls got nervous unless they were close to somebody of their own sex. Apparently, she wasn’t bothered by the fact that this wasn’t her home field. Or if she was, she hid it well. I was also surprised that she was so natural with us when we’d never had a proper conversation before.

“But, Shirakawa and Fujisawa, you both like Mr. Yoshitsuru, don’t you?” she asked suddenly.

Takuya and I glanced at each other, then stared at her. I didn’t know about Takuya, but as far as I was concerned, she was right.

“What makes you think that?” Takuya asked.

“You’re kinda birds of a feather. You get so excited about something that you lose track of everything else before you know it. Like him... So I thought you

might sympathize.”

“Hmm...,” I muttered. She sure was sharp.

“Did you know the two of us before this, Sawatari?” Takuya asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Where from?”

“I saw that thing last year. You know, the, um...” Sayuri mimed flying with her right hand.

“...The cultural festival, huh?” Finally, it all made sense to me.

“Yes. That was amazing. You two made that together, didn’t you?”

“That’s right.” I nodded, feeling pleased.

“You aren’t doing it this year?”

“No, not this year,” Takuya answered. “There’s no point in doing the same thing over and over again. Besides, we’re working on something a little different now, and we have our hands full with that.”

“Something different? Like what?”

“It’s a secret,” I said.

“Aw, too bad.” Sayuri pursed her lips. Then, out of nowhere, she asked, “Hey, what’s friendship like for guys?”

“Huh?”

That was what I said, but I meant *What kind of question is that?*

“You two are super close, aren’t you? You’re always together. I was just curious about how that felt.”

“We don’t know, either, and it’s not like we’re together all the time,” Takuya answered. “Hiroki’s got his own friends, and so do I. Besides, I’m pretty sure hanging out feels the same whether you’re a guy or a girl.”

“You think so?” Sayuri lowered her voice a bit. “I get the feeling it’s different.”

Still, she didn’t seem as if she was going to pursue the issue further.

I gave a half-hearted “Huh.”

To be honest, at the time, I felt that Sayuri was in the way, just a little. She wasn't exactly rude, but the way she asked all her questions was threatening.

Frankly, I would have been more relaxed if it had been just me and Takuya. What if Sayuri's intrusion broke something we had? Takuya and I were already a perfect team; we didn't need anyone else. Adding a foreign entity—a *girl*—would throw things off-balance.

I'm not an intuitive person at all, but thinking about it now, that sneaking suspicion turned out to be really accurate.

Sunday came two days after that, and once the three of us had finished our morning club activities, we all went to Takuya's house to do some more work on the report. Takuya lived alone with his dad, and even on Sunday, his dad was holed up in his work space in another building. That meant we were able to get together informally. Convenient for us.

Sayuri's house was in Naka-Oguni, close to the school, and she'd suggested that we do this there, but Takuya and I had casually vetoed that. Two guys couldn't go to a girl's house! Too embarrassing. However, Sayuri apparently didn't care about those things, and she had no qualms about going to a guy's house when there wouldn't be any adults present.

“She's kinda funny...”

Later on, Takuya and I compared notes on her with each other. In the middle of our thorny adolescence, her behavior was curious.

Takuya's house was an old, traditional Japanese-style place that looked a lot like mine. He showed Sayuri and me into a room with a Buddhist family altar. Then, with some difficulty, he lugged in a big, low table from the room next to it. We spread out our notebooks and the materials we'd borrowed from the library on top of it.

Sayuri eased her posture just a little, shifting her legs to the side, and sat there looking small and quiet and like she completely belonged in this room. To her, this really was nothing. She seemed incredibly relaxed.

Suddenly, she put her hands on her knees, shoulders curving inward, and

cocked her head slightly.

“It’s strange. I feel like I’ve dreamed about this before,” she said.

Her defenses were completely down, and maybe that was what nudged the pendulum in my heart to begin its first slow swing.

She said she liked Kenji Miyazawa.

We made fantastic progress on our report, mostly thanks to Sayuri.

She was startlingly clever. Both Takuya and I had brains that were fundamentally wired for science, and our grades in math and the sciences were pretty good, but Sayuri was the opposite: She was brilliant at literature. Yoshitsuru had copied and handed out expert papers on modern lit, which were definitely too much for middle schoolers to handle, but she read them and summarized the content for us without much trouble. We were thoroughly impressed, and we wrote the report pretty much exactly the way she said to.

However, what I really admired was how incredibly alive Sayuri looked when she was reading books or talking about them. It was so dramatic that she seemed like a different person. When she talked about the books she liked, I could see her sympathy, and intimacy, and empathy.

“The thing is—I really understand Kenji.”

If he had someone reading him this seriously, Kenji Miyazawa was probably pretty satisfied.

“Kenji Miyazawa, huh...?” Frankly, I couldn’t make heads or tails of his stuff when I read it, and I sighed in an attempt to expel the fog from my mind. “I’ve never even thought about whose books I like, or what kind.”

“What sort of books do you two usually read?”

“Computer books and books about physics. Stuff like that,” Takuya said, then jerked a thumb at me. “All this guy reads is manga.”

“It’s not *all* manga.”

“Okay then, tell us the title of the last book you read.”

“Uh...” I thought for a little. “*Whetting Techniques, Expanded.*” After I said it, I

thought with some disappointment in myself, *That's pretty boring, I guess.*

"What's that?" Sayuri asked, mystified.

"It's basically a book on how to sharpen blades," I said. "Like how to use a grinder to revitalize the point on a drill press, and then things like cutters and kitchen knives..."

"You can sharpen kitchen knives?" Sayuri was more impressed than I'd expected.

"Sure. Why are you so surprised, though? Anyone can."

"I can't. That's amazing. I didn't know boys read things like that. And then you do all sorts of useful things with it..."

"Ha, no, this guy's special. That is not typical reading material for a guy," Takuya joked. "He's a little weird."

"The stuff you like is weird, too!"

Sayuri watched us, laughing in that breathy voice of hers. Her laugh was always adorable, almost ticklish. "That's so neat. All I've got is literature. I read pretty much anything in that category, but..."

Since it was her, I thought she probably really did read everything she could get her hands on.

A question occurred to me, and I immediately asked it.

"Hey, Sawatari, why do you read? I mean, I only do it when there's something I have to look up, so..."

"Why do I read when I don't have a reason, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"That's a good question." She thought for a minute. "I think I do it because I want that feeling that hits me when I'm reading."

"What feeling?"

"Disappearing."

"Disappearing...?"

“Um... First, all the things around me go away. Then I go, too,” she said. “I’m not reading the book anymore; all that’s there is what’s inside. Doesn’t that ever happen to you?”

“I’m not sure,” Takuya said. “I think it feels like that when you get really absorbed in something.”

“It does,” Sayuri said. “But not quite. It’s more like I’m switching this world and the other one...”

“What if it’s something like this? Can you get that absorbed when you read it?” I put the paperback of *Spring and Asura* over my face and lolled backward. “I can’t even tell what the heck is written in here.”

“Uh-huh. I can.”

“Seriously? You get lost in ‘Surrendering not to the rain, nor to the wind’?”

“That one’s fine, too, but...” Sayuri giggled. Then her face grew serious, and she started to recite a poem from memory. “‘Though my hands are fevered, my legs weak, yet I am he who builds this tower.’”

“Tower?” I flinched and sat up, fast.

“Yes.” She nodded, paging through the collection of poems in the book. “‘Exquisite where’er it may be, here and there, present and future, on the axis of onward-gliding time, brilliantly illuminating the darkness, the ineffable sanctity of that tower.’”

“What is that?” Takuya asked.

“It’s called ‘Though My Hands Are Fevered, My Legs Weak.’ It’s a poem Kenji wrote right before he died. That’s my favorite.”

“What did that part you said just now mean?”

“I’m not actually sure... I think he probably meant something along the lines of ‘I’m about to become something indestructible.’”

“It sounds kind of like he was talking about that one in the north,” I said quietly.

“It really does. I bet that tower will stand there for a century or more, too.”

Sayuri poked at the glass pitcher of barley tea with a finger, sending ripples through it.

“Books are indestructible memories,” she said. “Take Kenji Miyazawa. Even now, a hundred years later, his book is in print, and we’re reading it. There are even people like Mr. Yoshitsuru. He’s still definitely *here*, in his own way. I envy him. I’m sure everybody would forget about me right away, never to remember. Right now I’m still at school with my friends and everybody else. It’s fun, but after we graduate and start going to different schools, it wouldn’t take long.”

I was startled, and so was Takuya. She didn’t know us that well, but here she was just chatting with us about this deep and serious stuff. We never saw it coming.

Sayuri didn’t sound particularly sad or lonely, just practical. Her genuine feelings showed more clearly that way.

Genuineness is a scary thing. Jokes and banter don’t put pressure on people, but revealing how you really feel will make them nervous.

Somebody needed to say something, so I stepped up. “I don’t think they will...”

“It’s true, though. After all, I’m sure I’ll forget a lot of my friends and other people. It’s a two-way street. I think that’s just how it goes, but...”

I probably managed to keep the shock from showing too much on my face. I mean, do girls start thinking about the distant future like that now? That’s so weird. All I think about is what I’m going to do for the rest of today or what I should do tomorrow.

Anyway, Sayuri’s comments made a big impression on me, and I thought that alone would make me remember her for quite a while. I wondered whether I should assure her that I wouldn’t forget. I was pretty torn; it’s hard to say something so dramatic. Ultimately, I kept my mouth shut.

I think I probably should have said it, though.

In Modern Japanese class several days later, the teacher called on Sayuri and had her read Kenji’s “The Morning of the Last Farewell.” Her voice was as transparent as spun glass, a perfect match for a poem about sleet and snow.

Much later, years later, I thought about it. Even back then, Sayuri had been asking us for help. She'd been screaming for us to take her somewhere else, to the place we promised. I don't know why she came to us. All I can say for sure is that, back then, we were probably the only ones who had enough power to take her somewhere. Maybe she sensed that. After all, she was terrifyingly sensitive.

We were too young, though, and we were thinking only about ourselves. Of course we were. Even so, I still think about it: If we'd picked up on her silent cry sooner, I'm pretty sure Sayuri and Takuya and I would all have ended up in very different places.

And that makes me so sad I can hardly stand it.

*

Parting ways with Takuya at the drinking fountain, I went back to the archery range. I needed to shoot more.

I stepped onto the floorboards of the deserted range and glared at the target. Focusing until every last nerve was under my control, I ran through the series of motions, nocking an arrow to my bow.

"She's cute, sure...but that doesn't mean I have to go out with her, does it?"

"I don't think that's how it's supposed to be."

"Then who would be?"

Takuya's honest, straightforward words had become my mental static.

My shot was crooked. Of course it was; I wasn't being honest.

"Sawatari."

I heard the pleasant sound of the arrow hitting the target. I was spot-on. But there was a mistake here, somewhere.

We'd had nothing but the closing ceremony and homeroom that day, and all of the students had promptly left. Which meant there was almost no one at Minami-Yomogita Station after three in the afternoon.

I meandered across the station's pedestrian bridge, hands shoved into the pockets of my jacket. Just before I started down the stairs to the platform, I

casually glanced out a window at the view, then stopped in my tracks.

On the platform, a girl was reading a paperback while she waited for the train by herself—and that girl was Sayuri.

I was immediately tense.

I couldn't just keep standing there, so I slowly started walking again. For no discernible reason, I tried to keep my footsteps quiet as I went down the stairs.

As soon as I left the steps, I turned to face the rails and stood there, pretending I hadn't noticed her.

Frankly, I think I was scared. Sayuri and I didn't really have anything in common. A conversation could get awkward fast, and she might decide I was boring... I could imagine all sorts of awful scenarios, and I was a coward.

I was also afraid of Sayuri herself. I'd sensed a power in her, something that could change who I was, whether I wanted it to or not. If I was near her, she might put her small white hand inside me and rebuild my heart as easily as changing out plastic bricks. If Takuya had been there like usual, I probably could have kept a conversation going without feeling the pressure, but...

Takuya was his own can of worms. I wanted to have a bit of self-restraint, for his sake. Or maybe I was just using that as an excuse, and I only wanted to avoid her.

I stood about forty to fifty feet away from Sayuri, looking the other way, yet staying intensely aware of her.

I heard a soft rustle as she turned a page in her book, and I stole a glance at her.

She was wearing the same duffle coat as yesterday, and she had her chin tucked into the same muffler. From time to time, a puff of white breath mingled with the clear air of that fine afternoon. It was a pretty cold day, but she didn't look very cold. Maybe she didn't feel it when she was lost in a book. Her posture was so nice, too. When people read books standing up, their heads tend to droop, but her back was perfectly straight. She had large eyes with big irises. Every so often, they moved a little or blinked, and without really meaning to, I was staring at them. And then...

She glanced my way and noticed my presence.

“Fujisawa.”

Sayuri closed her book, her hands coming together as if in prayer, and she called my name with a smile. Her smile was the definition of *carefree*, the kind that lit up and instantly changed the mood of the place. My face was burning red. Bewildered, I wondered how I should interpret that expression. Sayuri was trotting over to me, so I took two or three steps closer to her as well. She stopped just a foot and a half away. Close enough to send me completely off-balance.

“If you’d noticed me, I wish you’d said something,” she said, oblivious to my dismay.

“I was just thinking of doing that,” I said, keeping up appearances. “You’re heading home late, Sawatari. I thought I was going to be the only one on the next train.”

“I know. I was practicing, and it made me late.”

“Violin?”

“Yes. I’m a klutz, so I’m always later than everyone else.” Then she asked, “Shirakawa isn’t with you today?”

“No. I stopped by my club, too.”

“You practice archery by yourself sometimes, don’t you, Fujisawa?”

“How did you know?”

It was getting harder and harder to keep calm, and I turned toward the rails.

“I walk by the archery range a lot. I heard arrows, but it wasn’t time for club, so I peeked through the window.”

“I have trouble clearing my mind, so I can’t always concentrate with everyone else around. Basically...I’m just bad at it.”

“You’re like me.”

I could feel her smiling beside me. I could also sense an approaching train, so I looked down to the end of the tracks. As the white diesel engine slowly glided

up to the platform, I watched it impatiently. The whole time, I could feel Sayuri's eyes on me.

She and I boarded the train through the very last door.

Sayuri didn't sit down. Instead, she leaned against the wall that separated the passenger area from the engineer's seat. Next to her, I did the same thing.

"Fujisawa, spring vacation starts tomorrow. What will you be doing?"

"Working part-time with Takuya."

"A part-time job? Lucky. I'd like to do that, too. Do your parents...?"

"No, they don't know. Are you bad at keeping secrets like that from your parents?"

"Yes, I'd probably get caught. Where will you be working?"

"At a factory in Hamana that subcontracts to the military. We'll be assembling guided missiles."

"Lucky... All I've got is club."

"You're not retiring?"

"No, not for a little longer."

"I see."

"Mm-hmm."

And the conversation petered out.

I probably should have asked her more about herself. If you think about it, there were tons of things to talk about. What piece she was playing in club right now, for example, or what kind of music she liked, or even about her family.

For whatever reason, though, I stayed quiet.

In the silence, I listened to the regular *clickety-clack* of the train wheels crossing the seams in the rails. At first, it seemed like a countdown until the awkwardness could be over, but before long, it started to feel as if I was listening to my own heartbeat.

The train swayed, and Sayuri's shoulder brushed against me.

That was when it happened.

Put briefly, it was the power of attraction. I sensed it in Sayuri; it was like a whirlpool in the ocean, and I was the little boat getting sucked in. Whatever it was inside me that generated all my emotions was being drawn into her and locked away. It reminded me of the Bermuda Triangle or a black hole.

Of course, that was just something I'd felt, not necessarily something she'd done. But in that one moment, something had forever changed me on the inside. Like whoever I'd been before was someone else entirely. It wasn't fair, but I felt something almost like hatred for Sayuri. I never asked for this drastic transformation. I preferred changing myself, little by little and of my own free will. Mastering a tool I hadn't been able to use before, for example, or learning how to shoot accurately. She'd taken over me, and it was all I could do to withstand the pain of it.

The announcement that we were approaching Naka-Oguni Station played, and my harsh, stormy mood eased just a little. It didn't disappear, though; it lingered, seething and stirring the surface of the water. I might get used to that mood, I thought, but it would never go away.

"We're here already...," Sayuri said as the train began to brake.

What does that mean? I thought as my heart gasped for breath. Did it mean she hadn't been bored, riding a train alone with me in almost total silence? I wanted to ask, but that's what socially awkward people do. As I hesitated, she glanced up into my face.

"Fujisawa, listen."

"...Hmm?"

"Yesterday, I dreamed that I was going home with you like this."

I gulped, then froze up.

I thought my heart would stop. *What on earth does that mean?* I wasn't sure, but could it mean she didn't mind being alone with me all that much? Maybe it meant I had a chance here. How could I not have been happy about that? The blood rushed to my head. The train stopped. With a heavy clunk, the doors opened. Sayuri turned on her heel and descended to the concrete platform, her

feet light on the steps. Almost as if I was being pulled toward it, I went up to the door. She did another about-face, looked at me, raised a hand, and smiled.

“Bye-bye. See you in the new term.”

“...Yeah.”

With timing straight out of a TV drama, the door closed. Its glass window slid between me and Sayuri. I hadn't managed to ask her anything, but I almost felt as if she hadn't let me. It was both a disappointment and a relief. The train shambled into motion, and slowly Sayuri and I slid sideways and apart.

I stuck to the glass at the very back of the train, following Sayuri with my eyes. She'd just walked down the stone steps at the end of the platform, to the rails. Naka-Oguni Station didn't have a pedestrian bridge linking its platforms, and passengers had to walk directly across the tracks.

Sayuri didn't head straight for the ticket gate. For a little while, she walked comfortably along the track, toward me. Then she hopped up onto a rail, steadied herself, and began to walk along it as if it was a balance beam. From inside the receding train, I watched Sayuri acting out a scene from *Stand by Me*. She was beautiful in the truest sense.

Her form had shrunk in the distance, so I went to the door she'd left through, rested my forehead against the glass, and sighed. The storm was still there inside me. When I glanced out the window, we just happened to be traveling toward the tower in Ezo.

The sight of that tower stirred up a different swirling current in my heart, a confusion I couldn't control turning my breath ragged. When I gazed absently at the tower, the image of Sayuri walking along the rails appeared over it. In the picture in my mind, Sayuri was prepared to walk forever down a track that led to the tower.

7

Sayuri's presence lingered in my heart for ages, and that night, I wasn't able to sleep until nearly dawn.

When I got up, my head was foggy, my parents had already gone to work, and my grandpa had gone out somewhere, too. I slapped together a breakfast in the kitchen, then watched TV while I ate, still half asleep.

On the news, they were discussing the minister-level conference that was scheduled to take place between the US and the Union a few days from now. The focus was expected to be on Japan's North-South problem. The Union was apprehensive about the US military buildup at the Misawa base. Meanwhile, America planned to request a clear statement from the Union explaining why that tower had been built in its Ezo territory, as well as permission for an inspection to prove it wasn't a military facility.

That's not even funny. Don't go giving away its secrets like that.

I felt a little anxious. To Japan, the Union was the enemy, but with regard to the tower, I ended up siding emotionally with the Union no matter what I did.

I left the house, boarded a train, and got off at Tsugaru-Hamana. I hauled my granny bike out of the station bicycle parking lot where I'd left it, then rode down a road that ran through farm fields, standing up on the pedals.

After I'd crossed two bridges, the road curved to avoid a small mountain, and once I was past that, Emishi Manufacturing came into view.

I coasted into the factory lot without braking, did a lap around the parking area, which was big enough for a large truck to turn around in easily (it was actually covered in grass and way bigger than it needed to be), and stopped in front of the office building.

When I entered the factory through a shutter that had been rolled up all the way, two employees—Miyagawa and Satou—were sitting by a potbellied stove in their work coveralls.

"Hello. Oh, is it break time? Yessss!"

"Yeah, have a seat," Miyagawa said.

I grabbed a folding chair that had been leaning against the wall and started to unfold it. While I was busy doing that, Takuya emerged from the kitchenette with a tea tray.

“You’re late, Hiroki.”

“Sorry.”

Takuya started setting the teacups on the old table. Satou promptly reached for the *karinto*, the brown sugar crackers that had been provided as a tea snack. As he did so, he turned to me with amusement.

“Hey, Hiroki. We heard.”

“Heard what?”

Miyagawa elaborated. “So you guys stole one of the JMSDF’s Chukars, huh?”

“We did not.”

Takuya had finished getting the tea ready and taken a seat in another folding chair, and he and I objected in unison.

“We didn’t steal it,” I added. “We found it in Amagamori.”

Takuya picked up where I’d left off. “It was downed during a training exercise, and they just left it in the woods, so we took it home.”

“Meaning you did steal it,” Satou wisecracked. “Good thinking, though. The engine on that may be a little underpowered, but it’ll probably get the job done. You guys managed to score the most expensive component for free, huh?”

“Be careful they don’t track you,” said Miyagawa. “But they’ve been doing lots of exercises with drones lately, so I doubt losing one or two of ’em will be much of a problem.”

“What he said. The Public Safety Commission already has their eye on us. If they catch you by accident, it’ll totally blow.”

“Public Safety’s coming here?” I asked. “But you’re working with the US military. Why would they suspect you?”

“Well, c’mon, we’re making explosives,” said Miyagawa. “We might be selling them to terrorists under the table.”

“Also, the boss just looks like a troublemaker,” Satou joked in a low voice.

Just as we were about to laugh—

“Sounds like defamation, boys.”

The aluminum door to the office opened, and the president, Mr. Okabe, walked in.

His voice was deep and intimidating. Between his close-cropped hair, his five-o'clock shadow, and the cigarette between his teeth, he was a tough-looking guy. If he hadn't been in his work coveralls, you would have guessed he was a gangster.

“So? What was that about me?”

Satou muttered “Shit” under his breath. Turning to the two of us, Mr. Okabe told us he was sorry, but there wasn't any work for us today.

“The stuff I was going to have you work on hasn't gotten here yet. Come back tomorrow. You'll have work to do worth more than the cost of the materials.”

“Awww...” We spoke in unison again.

“Don't gimme that.”

“Yessir.”

“All right, we don't need you here today, so get on up top.” After that, he spoke to his two staff members. “You two quit lazing around and get to work already.”

Takuya and I cut diagonally across the tall weeds of the Emishi Manufacturing yard, wove through a group of enormous wireless antennas that had to have been illegally installed, then crawled through a tear in the chain-link fence. Going through the factory lot and leaving through the back was the shortest way to get “up top.” If we'd taken a real route, we would have had to walk quite a bit farther on a winding road that took the long way round.

We passed through a small graveyard, took a path that ran beside an unmanned temple, and then we were finally on the mountain. We climbed straight up the unpaved mountain track. Walking was tough, and the incline was hard to handle, but it got us where we were going fast.

There was a practical reason we'd started working part-time, of course.

Back when Ezo was still a part of this country and still called Hokkaido, there

had apparently been plans to dig a tunnel under the Tsugaru Strait. A long, long one, like the tunnel under the Strait of Dover.

In the end, that plan had been scrapped when the North and South split, but there were still remnants of the construction around Mt. Hakamagoshi, like abandoned stations and tracks.

We climbed the slope without talking. We were panting, our breath making white clouds in front of our faces. Still, we kept going, and all of a sudden, the trees ended and the view opened up.

We were at the peak: a magnificently wide, gentle slope. At this time of year, it was white with residual snow. The snow-covered ground rolled on into the distance until it broke off, and beyond that was sky.

We always stopped and stood still here. The view of the sky from this position was due north.

The tower was visible. We gazed at it for a little while.

When we glanced to the right, there were several low, decaying wooden structures on the vast snowfield, with ample space between them. Three platforms in a row, linked by a pedestrian bridge, and a wooden main building.

It was an abandoned station, alone in the middle of the snowfield. The group of buildings reminded me of a photo I'd seen of an observation base at the South Pole.

The structure here was one of the stations from the tunnel project, discarded while it was still under construction. It had been abandoned completely, and nobody ever came near it.

We'd been making something here since the autumn of our first year of middle school, and our job at Emishi Manufacturing was bringing in the money to buy parts for it.

We walked over the white field, snow crunching underfoot. There was a lot less snow than there had once been, and the rusty rails showed through here and there.

"It's melted quite a bit. I want to get started again soon," I said.

“Let’s hope it’s actually done snowing,” Takuya answered. During the deepest part of winter, this place was buried, and we’d hardly been able to come here at all. Plus, we’d been low on funds.

Beside the abandoned station was a shed that had probably been built to house heavy construction equipment. It was a wooden building that looked like it had been thrown together in a hurry, and I suspected they’d meant it to be temporary. We called it “the hangar.” We went closer to it, and after we circled around to the back door, Takuya took the key out of his pocket.

“Without the rest of our materials, we’re not gonna get anything done here now. We may be set for the main engine, but we still don’t have the exterior nanonet or the starter motor. The big one is probably the superconducting motor, and finally, we’ll need a whole lot of kerosene. I dunno if we’ll be able to cover all that with part-time work, especially not minus a day.”

“We’ll figure it out. There’s summer vacation, too,” I told him.

“True.”

We went into the gloomy hangar.

The wallboards of the tumbledown building didn’t fit together properly, and light from outside streamed in through assorted cracks. In that faint light, you could just make out the shape of the thing in the center of the room.

Takuya raised the lever on a switchboard on the wall.

There was a *clack*, and four halogen floodlights threw their pallid light on the object from all sides.

An aluminum frame, with plastic sheets draped over it in places.

It was still just a skeleton, but a glance was enough to tell that it was a big bird with folded wings.

We’d made an airplane. A real one. Completely unique, the only one of its kind anywhere.

The Velaciela.

That was the name we’d end up giving it later on. It means “white wings,” or so we were told. We’d decided ahead of time that the aircraft was going to be

white. After all, it was destined to go to that white tower.

That's right. We weren't just going to fly it. We had a destination in mind.

We wanted to go to the place that looked close enough to touch and yet was beyond reach.

No matter what it took, we wanted to see the strange land of Ezo and its enormous tower up close.

We gazed at our work in progress, the bones of our winks, and basked in the deep, pleasant emotion that slowly filled us. We saw visions of the day we'd climb into the multiseat cockpit, open the throttle, and take off, feeling the g-forces work on us.

We were planning to fly over the border, to that tower, in this Velaciela.

*

We'd decided to build the airplane right after that jet incident in our first year.

The next one will be real.

I think we'd both had that thought, that sense of what was to come, while we were making the radio-controlled model.

We were learning to do things we'd never done before, and we could do more and more on our own. The pleasure of it was incredible. The elation drove us onward.

"Let's do it."

"Yeah."

That was the only real discussion Takuya and I had on the subject.

We didn't even consider the possibility that we couldn't. Looking back, we had serious guts: middle-school kids, trying to build a plane we could actually fly in, totally from scratch.

After we retrieved that radio-controlled jet from the gym roof and lashed it to the cargo rack of a bike, Takuya and I had a very terse discussion on the way home. We didn't say much because there was no real need to. "How far should we fly it?" I asked. Depending on the answer, the design would change quite a

bit.

“About that. There’s a place I want to go,” Takuya said.

“Me too,” I said.

And that was it. Neither of us explained exactly which place we meant. We already knew each other very well, and we didn’t need to ask our intuition to know we were working toward the same thing.

It was the middle of the night, so we couldn’t see it to the north then. But in our minds, that pure-white tower rose in the blackness, emitting rays of light like a midsummer sun.

Why the tower? If you’d asked me that at the time, I doubt I could have given a satisfactory answer. Even now, I’m not sure I can explain it very well.

Unless you grew up right next to it, seeing it every day, it might not be possible to understand that longing, that impatience.

You have to start with what it was like to see that tower every day for more than a dozen years.

The tower taught me just how beautiful straight lines were.

In terms of distance, it was about 220 miles from the Tsugaru Peninsula. That’s pretty far, but it looked so close. No, *close* isn’t quite right; it was more that it seemed to be bearing down on us. (Later on, I learned that wasn’t an illusion, but a phenomenon known as macroscopic quantum tunneling.) Sometimes, it seemed to be flaunting its beauty.

What on earth was happening in that beautiful place?

What sort of brilliant, wonderful secrets did it hold?

I had to know.

If there had been a path on solid ground between me and that tower, I’m sure I would have taken it sooner, no matter what it took. If a train had gone there, I would have jumped on. If not, I would have ridden my bike. If the road wasn’t one a bicycle could handle, I would have walked. The time would have been nothing to me.

But in reality, what lay between me and the tower was the ocean and a closed national border.

There was something beautiful in a place I could see; something was there, and yet I was separated from it. Excluded. It was almost personal, like I was being shunned.

And so I had to make a formal objection.

I had to have it.

One day, during the winter of our first year in middle school, I got the opportunity to watch Takuya's club practice.

He was in the speed skating club. Naturally, there was no skating rink at the school, so the club members took a minibus to a distant rink that had been set up on a lake.

It was pretty high in the mountains, and it had a good, clear view of the Tsugaru Strait and the tower beyond it.

I leaned against the minibus's sliding door and watched Takuya start. The pistol went off, and Takuya pushed against the ice with his skate blade, launching into a sprint that was more like running than skating.

As he set off, I got the feeling he was staring straight at the tower. Even after he began to build up speed and his upper body leaned far forward, his eyes were fixed on the distance.

Before long, he entered the curve, and the tower slipped out of sight. Still, even when it was behind him, he was sprinting toward it in his mind, I think.

When Takuya had skated three quarters of the looped track, the tower came back into sight again. Almost frustrated, he mustered his strength and shoved the ice behind him until he crossed the finish line, slowly shedding the momentum he'd built up. But his eyes were constantly on the tower.

When I realized what he was doing, I almost teared up a little. I felt like yelling "We're the same! I'm like that, too!"

When you find someone who cares about the same things as you, as much as you do, it's impossible to describe how hard it hits you. Back then, Takuya didn't

feel like “someone else” to me at all. It even felt like he was a second me.

“We’re totally going there.”

That was what I told Takuya, thumping him on the back, when he’d changed into his shoes and come back up to the bus.

Startled, he gazed at me steadily. Then he said, “Yeah, absolutely.”

He smiled, and I think he was trying to hide his embarrassment.

When it came to building an actual plane, we had two general problems: materials and the runway.

At first, we’d planned to clean up the garage at my place and build it there, bit by bit, component by component.

In that case, the issues were how we were going to transport the plane, and how far, and where we were going to fly it from.

We needed a place with plenty of room and a long straight line. Somewhere as near as possible to Hokkaido. We wanted to aim straight for the sea, without flying over houses or the town.

At one point, we even gave serious consideration to commandeering a highway somewhere or changing the whole design and turning it into a seaplane.

It was a genuine coincidence that we found that abandoned station.

“Could we make it work with some abandoned train tracks?”

It was Takuya who’d hit on that idea, of course. He came up with all kinds of ideas.

In our search for a straight section of track that would make a good runway, we wandered along between the rails with no real destination in mind, like something out of a movie. This was right before the first snowfall of that year. And then we reached the top of that mountain.

When we found the abandoned station, we jumped and cheered.

The place had rusted rails crawling down a gentle slope and crossing in complicated ways. Track switches. Three island-type platforms. A decaying

enclosed overpass going up and over to connect them.

All of it fascinated us. It was like a secret base. The station was half-flooded with overflow from a nearby lake, which meant the island platforms were actual islands. How cool was that? There were fish living in that water, and you could probably catch them without too much trouble.

We were over the moon as we explored the whole place. We ran up the pedestrian bridge (when we got to the top, the floor felt ready to drop out from under us, so we walked softly), chucked rocks at the water from one of the platforms, and took the seats out of an abandoned bus that had tipped over, tossing them outside.

I'd always wanted to try napping with a train rail as my pillow, and that silly little dream of mine came true. If I'd done that on a track that was in use, the results would have been ugly, but there was nobody here to see or disapprove.

Then Takuya came running down the track like a train and kicked me in the side. He was breathing hard through his nose, sounding almost like an engine himself. It wasn't just from the exercise.

"What's got you so worked up?"

"This! What, you don't feel it, too?"

"Of course I do!" I told him.

And so we decided to build our plane there, at the abandoned station. In terms of geography, we'd be able to take off directly over the ocean, and there were straight rails here, too. If we were going to take off from there, it would be easiest to build it there.

On the other hand, we didn't have any prospects for the problem of materials for a while.

There were a ton of things we needed. First and most important, a jet engine. Aluminum for the frame, and a carbon nanonet. A superconducting motor. All expensive stuff. We'd have to get the funds together somehow. And the problem of how to get those things was even tougher. We were minors; how were we supposed to order items like that?

In the end, we did find a way, and once again, we had the abandoned station to thank for it. Sometimes when one thing goes right, it starts a chain reaction that sets everything in motion.

Over the course of multiple trips to and from the old station, we learned that the fastest way down the mountain was to go straight down the mountain track and come out at the back of Emishi Manufacturing. We'd sneak through the factory lot. From there, we could take a paved road and get to the station easily. There was a break in the rusty chain-link fence, and if we went through it, infiltrating the lot was a cinch.

One day, an employee caught us in the act. We didn't learn his name until later, but it was Satou, the youngest guy at the company. He dragged us up to the boss's office, stern-faced. When he spotted us, we'd tried to run, but he'd tripped Takuya and had him pinned on the ground in no time. I couldn't just cut and run by myself, so I'd grudgingly surrendered.

They were only dealing with middle schoolers who'd sneaked onto their property, so I thought this was overkill, but the atmosphere was so tense and prickly I had no idea what would happen to me if I said so.

The boss's room was on the second floor of a prefab building. There were several steel desks for staff members in there, so it really seemed more accurate to call it an office. The president, Mr. Okabe—whose name we didn't know yet—was at the desk at the front. He was reading a newspaper, a cigarette between his teeth.

When Satou shoved us forward, the two of us stumbled a bit. "These are trespassers who've been coming in through the back," he said.

"Huh?" said Mr. Okabe. He put down his paper and stood up, cigarette still in his mouth.

He was a big guy. He might not have hit six feet tall, but he was really close. His arms were as thick as clubs. He looked down at us.

"Who're you supposed to be?" he asked harshly. "You've got one minute; gimme your excuse. If I like it, I'll send you home in one piece."

Sick with fear, Takuya and I scrambled to explain. Cutting through this lot was

an easy way to get to the abandoned station, and we'd found the station while looking for a runway, and we were thinking of building a full-size plane there...

"A plane?" Mr. Okabe sounded suspicious. "Oh, hey, are you those kids? The little twerps who pulled that stunt with a jet at the middle school?"

Without thinking, I responded with a question of my own. "How do you know about that?"

Immediately after I said it, I ducked my head, thinking he might get mad at me for answering back, but Mr. Okabe stubbed his cig into an ashtray and smirked.

"Adults have their own intel networks. I've got connections with the whole faculty at Minami-Yomogita Middle."

Very quietly, I heard Takuya say, "Shit." I felt the same way.

Apparently deciding he might be able to get through to him, Takuya took the conversation in a different direction.

"Um, this is a munitions factory, isn't it?"

"You bet it is. Lotta scary guys make their dangerous toys here. It's not a place for kids to wander around."

"Could you sell us some aluminum?"

I was startled. What the heck was he saying?

"Aluminum? What are you going to do with that?"

"Use it for our plane."

Satou interjected, "This isn't a toy plane?"

"No. It's a two-seater," Takuya snapped.

I'd been stunned by the sudden development, but the blood finally started to make it to my brain again. Being able to procure materials from somewhere this close would be fantastically convenient. I decided to follow Takuya's lead.

"And a superconducting motor or a small jet engine or something—if you can!" I said loudly.

"Whoa, hold it, a jet engine?"

Leaning back against the edge of the desk, Mr. Okabe lit a new cigarette. “Do you have the plans? Lemme see.”

The plans were in my jacket pocket, folded up small and beginning to wear through at the creases; I took them out and handed them over. It was the design Takuya and I had been pouring all our energy into since early fall. Mr. Okabe laid it flat on the desk, rubbing at it to straighten out the wrinkles, then began examining it closely.

“Two main propulsion systems...a ring wing... You’ve got some pretty fancy ideas here. Hey, Satou, come take a look at this.”

“Yessir... Whoa, what the hell? You’re doing this for you, that’s for sure. Still, this is, hmm...”

“What?”

“It looks like it could fly, technically.”

“Of course it does!” Takuya and I said at the same time.

“Go get Miyagawa. He knows the most about this stuff,” Mr. Okabe said, and Satou jogged out of the room.

“Do you make planes here, too?” I asked.

“Nah. We don’t do that much. We make a lotta similar things, though.”

Satou came back with a solidly built employee. That was Miyagawa. He already seemed to know what was up; he nodded to the president, then went right over to look at the plans on the desk.

“Your design’s pretty close to the line...,” he said, after looking at it intently for a while. “C’mere a sec,” he said, calling us over. “This bit. The second the legs are up, it’ll crack. It’s fine to make it light, but you haven’t kept it strong.”

“But if we mess with that,” I said, “the balance of the whole thing is gonna—”

“Yep,” Miyagawa replied bluntly. “So you’ll have to redo this whole thing. I’ll teach you the nitty-gritty, so come ask me later.”

“Well? How’s it look?” Mr. Okabe asked.

“It’s an interesting idea. Go ahead and let them do it,” he answered.

“Hmm. I see...” Mr. Okabe exhaled smoke. “Listen, aluminum alloy for planes costs a bundle, but I’ll sell you some if you’ve got the money. Do you?”

“Well, uh...”

“And do a coupla kids like you even know how to work metal?”

“Yes!” I practically snapped. It was pretty much the only thing I could do, but I could do it with utter confidence. This was no time to be humble or hesitant. “Don’t underestimate us, sir,” I added.

“I think we can do it, of course,” Takuya said. His voice seemed more powerful when he was talking quietly.

“Well, you talk big enough. All right, c’mon downstairs.” Mr. Okabe walked to the exit and opened the door. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

We were taken outside, then into the next building over—the factory—which was open all the way through the second story. One wall was almost entirely shutters, and it was made so that big trucks could drive in.

“Show ’em how it’s done first.”

Mr. Okabe jerked his chin lightly, and Satou immediately got down to business.

The stacked objects were boxes made of thin iron, of a size you could hold with both hands. Inside, they were fitted with components and hooks for holding cords. What Satou showed us was how to put a square hole in the side; the work itself wasn’t hard, but it was a demanding process that didn’t allow for even the slightest error in positioning.

When they prompted us, we didn’t have to ask for any more information. We just picked up the necessary equipment and completed the same process on two or three more boxes.

The next thing they had us do was weld the hemispherical exterior of something; we managed that without a problem, too. We definitely got a shock, though, when the last object they brought out was an orange cylinder about as tall as a person. We were supposed to add a tail assembly, hook up a laptop, and run an operation check on the electrical components, and the actual work

was stuff even we could do. When we timidly did it, Mr. Okabe said, “If you snout-nosed kids can handle that, color me impressed.”

“But this is a...,” Takuya murmured.

“Yeah, it’s a ballistic missile.”

“Agh, I knew it!”

We forgot our manners and yelled.

Mr. Okabe scratched his chin and spoke with some amusement.

“You’ve got a job here if you want it, you two. We’re short-staffed right now. If you do, I’ll sell you aluminum or a motor or whatever you want at cost. It’s dangerous work, so the hourly wage is set pretty high.”

We looked at each other. Never underestimate the power of sheer dumb luck.

But apparently, the dangerous guys at the factory had taken quite a liking to Takuya and me.

That was how we got steel lockers and work coveralls and dangerous yet lucrative jobs at Emishi Manufacturing on our Sunday afternoons and long vacations.

From the winter of our first year in middle school to the spring of our second, while we worked, we borrowed a corner of the factory and went back over our design. (At that time of year, the snow kept us from going to the abandoned station.) Every so often, Miyagawa or Satou would confiscate our blueprints and pick them apart. That ticked us off, but their critiques were always correct, and they freely taught us procedures and design techniques we didn’t know. In the end, we gratefully followed their recommendations.

However, there was one we just couldn’t follow, no matter how strongly they pushed for it.

It was winter vacation of our second year of middle school. Takuya and I worked from morning till evening, putting the finishing touches on guided missiles and inspecting them. As the tension rose between the US-Japan alliance and the Union, Emishi Manufacturing got more and more job orders.

The processes we were in charge of were the simplest and easiest ones, so we weren't busy enough to start genuinely panicking. When we had a free moment, though, we were told to help out with processes that were usually the purview of the full-time staff members, and carts loaded with missiles just kept coming. We couldn't let down our guard. We had to use our heads and work efficiently, and the job was plenty difficult enough.

During a break, I told Mr. Okabe that we were going to have to buy kerosene at some point and asked him how much it would cost. Suspicious, Mr. Okabe asked if we were seriously planning on building a jet.

"Look, if you pay for it, I'll sell you kerosene or nitrogen or whatever you need," Mr. Okabe said, crunching away on a rice cracker. "Jet fuel's expensive, though. And it's risky stuff for kids to be handling, too. Why not just knuckle under and make it a reciprocating engine or a semiconducting motor?"

"No, we can't compromise," Takuya answered.

"Huh...," Mr. Okabe grunted, and I know he thought we were a couple of smart-asses. He shifted in his creaky folding chair.

The small monaural TV beside the stove was showing the news, which was reporting on a scramble drill at the Misawa base.

"Why go to the trouble of making it a jet engine?" he asked.

"Because they're cool!"

"Because they're cool!"

Takuya and I answered in perfect sync. After I said it, I thought, *Wait, no, that's not quite right*. And when I said "That's not why!" Takuya said the same thing at almost the same time.

"Hold it, Hiroki, there were other reasons."

"Yeah. We thought about other stuff before we settled on that."

"What was it again? Why did we give it a double engine?"

"Uh, you know."

"Oh yeah."

“Because we want to make it transform!” Again, we spoke at the exact same time.

“No, that’s not it, either,” Takuya said. “There was a real reason, and we decided to make it transform because of it, remember?”

“Really?”

“Hold on, kids. Do you know how much a jet engine costs?” Mr. Okabe cut in.

“How much, sir?”

“Enough to shatter your dreams.”

I wilted. Takuya clammed up, too.

The news had shifted to footage of a large-scale exercise being conducted at the Amagamori Range. Several training support warships were deployed along the Sabishiro coast, enthusiastically firing orange-painted Chukar IVs and Firebees.

The Chukars and Firebees were unmanned jets known as target drones; they were treated as enemy fighters and shot down. They were manufactured solely for the sake of these drills. Lines of fire streaked from the coast of Amagamori toward the sky, and ground-to-air missiles were launched. The screen showed close-up footage of a Firebee taking a bullet in its center and exploding, then a Chukar falling into the forest, its wings shot through.

“That is such a waste,” I said, and meant it. “They make all of those just to shoot them down. If they’re gonna do that, couldn’t they just give us one for free...?”

I was expecting to hear *Quit talking crazy*, but Takuya was staring at me, wide-eyed. “That’s it,” he said.

“Oh...”

I knew what he was thinking right away.

“Look, whatever.” Mr. Okabe might have seen through our plan, but he sounded too tired to deal with us if he had. “Just be careful, all right? I don’t wanna deal with a couple of dead kids.”

Early the next morning, Takuya and I transferred from train to train all the way to Misawa, then switched to a sightseeing bus and got off at the Amagamori stop. After making sure nobody was watching, we climbed over a fence that was dramatically marked DEFENSE AGENCY. Then we spent the whole day wandering nearly at random through the dense woods on the flat land. The blackish-green conifers were coated with pure-white snow, and the contrast made us dizzy after a while. If we were spotted by range personnel or members of the JSDF, we'd definitely be in deep trouble, and we had to keep our nerves sharp the entire time.

When the sun had nearly set and we were on the verge of giving up, I thought I saw something orange out of the corner of my eye, and my whole body buzzed with excitement.

It was a downed Chukar IV, lying there with a tree root as its pillow. Target drones were promptly retrieved, but Takuya was the one who'd figured that there had to be some that were missed. I was about to call to him, but his quiet "hey" came first. He'd spotted a different Chukar. We'd found two at once, only twenty yards apart.

When we checked them over, one had been completely destroyed, but the other was nearly undamaged and apparently salvageable. Takuya and I covered it with a plastic sheet to hide it, securing the sheet with rope. Then we carried it right out of the forest, without being spotted.

To anyone who saw us, we must have seemed completely bizarre: two middle schoolers carrying a big cylinder that looked like a missile. It was dusk when we walked through the town, so we were able to relax a bit, but when we got on the bus, when we went through the ticket gate, and when the conductor actually came to inspect our tickets, we got nervous. Silently, I chanted to myself, *Nothing to hide, nothing to hide*, like a spell to ward off danger.

When we reached Minmaya and made it through the ticket gate, a sigh of deep fatigue escaped us. Takuya and I walked down pitch-black farm roads, carrying the Chukar, and stowed it in the garage at my house. Later on, when we checked the engine, it still ran just fine. For only a few thousand yen in transportation costs, we'd gotten our jet engine.

After I became intensely conscious of Sayuri, I started to notice her health seemed frail. She wasn't actually absent much, but she often left early. There were also two or three times when she felt faint during the morning assembly and ended up going to the infirmary.

Back then, though, all I or anyone else thought was that she was a girl, and these things happened.

After the Kenji Miyazawa report for Modern Japanese, Takuya, Sayuri, and I had gotten a little closer, and sometimes we'd get together and chat.

That said, of course, we weren't all that close. After all, we were in middle school, and that wall between boys and girls of that age existed for us, too. Both Takuya and I felt much more at ease hanging out with other guys, and Sayuri got along well with her friends of her own gender.

By the time we started our third year, that had changed.

There was a class shuffle. For the first time, Takuya and I were separated. I was disappointed, but we were together all the time outside school, and just being split up in school didn't change our relationship. I was the amiable type, so I fit in with the members of my new class easily, and Takuya did his thing and took over the class next door at his usual speed.

Sayuri ended up in my class. I was secretly happy about that, but I felt a little guilty at the same time. It seemed like I was cheating somehow.

Beginning that spring, I could see Sayuri becoming the odd one out among the girls in our class. I didn't really understand why. I certainly couldn't ask her directly.

Navigating school relationships can be hellish. If you fail to build connections within a week or two after a class shuffle, the consequences will haunt you for the rest of the year. Maybe that's what tripped her up.

Sayuri was pretty, and she probably wasn't aware of it. Maybe that earned her the enmity of the other girls. Unconscious charm does tend to lower the goodwill of members of your own gender.

She was the type who could always remember her dreams, and sometimes she'd tell me or Takuya what had happened in dreams she'd had. She liked talking about things like that. But those meandering stories don't appeal to everyone; maybe that drove others away. I don't know what the truth was.

Whatever the cause, in our second year, Sayuri had always ridden the train to and from school with her friends, and by the summer of our third year, she usually went home alone.

And if I'd picked up on it, Takuya must have, too, even if he was in another class. That may partly explain why he dragged Sayuri into our secret.

It was a hot, sunny, bone-dry day at the beginning of July. The plane we'd spent a full year constructing was making steady progress, and at that point, we were stretching the exterior nanonet over the frame. This is the most fun part of the job; all at once, it starts to look like an airplane. Every day after school, Takuya and I raced to the abandoned station and applied as much of the exterior as we could.

That was our plan for that day, too. When sixth period ended, I surreptitiously watched most of my classmates leave for supplemental lectures intended to help them with high school entrance exams, while I hurried out of the classroom myself. Just as I was about to leave, Sayuri stopped me.

"Fujisawa, I'm going, too."

I froze, taken aback for several different reasons.

"Going...where? Sawatari..."

"The place where you go every day. Shirakawa invited me yesterday. He said he'd show me something cool."

"S-something cool...", I stammered.

The fact that Takuya had invited Sayuri to the abandoned station, without checking with me first, was a pretty big shock.

If the people around us found out what we were doing, it could spiral into a major problem. I didn't think Sayuri would actually tell on us, but there was no way of knowing when and how the secret might slip out. We'd been building

this on our own, and we'd been so careful to keep the place under wraps. And he'd just leaked it to a girl. I wasn't okay with that. Frankly, I wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing.

That was how I felt about it.

Now that the cat was out of the bag, though, if I refused to take her, it would only make the situation more complicated. I don't know if Sayuri noticed my conflicted feelings.

"Come on, let's go!" she said.

Her big, round, straightforward eyes urged me on. Giving up, I motioned for her to follow and left the school.

When we got to Minami-Yomogita Station, I waited for Sayuri to buy a transfer ticket to Tsugaru-Hamana, and then we waited on the outbound platform. Before long, Takuya belatedly appeared through the ticket gate. Sayuri called his name and waved. From an angle where she wouldn't see it, I shot him a fierce glare.

Sorry. Takuya got his meaning across with a subtle gesture and expression.

We'd been around each other a lot over the past few years, so we were able to communicate on a subtle level. It dawned on me that Takuya hadn't seen this emergency coming, either.

On the train, the three of us sat in the same box seat. For the half hour or so it took to get to Tsugaru-Hamana, we made small talk. About stuff like which variety programs we enjoyed and what we thought of this or that entertainer. Maybe because she was the type who liked saving the fun for later, Sayuri didn't ask a single question about where we were going or what we were planning to show her.

As far as we were concerned, that was a blessing. During the whole pointless conversation, I was dying to grill Takuya about why Sayuri was here right now, but of course I couldn't ask him in front of her.

When we got off at Tsugaru-Hamana, Sayuri told us her ticket had gotten stuck in the bottom of her pocket. I grabbed the chance to get Takuya down onto the platform ahead of her so I could whisper to him.

“What’d you go and tell her for?”

“I didn’t mean to. We were talking, and it just kinda happened.”

“What do you mean, ‘It just kinda happened’?”

“I can’t really explain it, but this was all I could do. I’m really sorry.”

That told me nothing. I tried to press him harder, but Sayuri stepped down from the train and kept me from saying anything else.

Sayuri had apparently been told that we were going to drop by the place where we worked first, so she stopped at a store in front of the station and bought some ice pops as a present. As Takuya and I waited outside the store, we continued our whispered conversation.

“If we show her that, she’s going to ask all kinds of questions. She’s gonna ask us why,” I muttered.

“Yeah, she will,” Takuya responded quietly.

“So what do we say?”

“Wanna just tell her we’re flying to the tower?”

“That would be a really bad idea...”

“Yeah. But what do we tell her if she asks where we’re going?”

“You think of that, stupid.”

“Who are you calling stupid, stupid?”

“Um...”

“What?!”

Sayuri interjected from very close to us, and we yelped in unison. Before we noticed, she was standing right in front of us, holding a plastic bag. We snapped to attention and froze there, and after a silence, we both gave awkward smiles as if we’d planned it. Sayuri giggled, as if the smiles had been contagious.

“You two are so weird.”

She said it so bashfully, so kindly. I never knew the word *weird* could sound so affectionate.

When we got to Emishi Manufacturing, feeling sweat trickling under our shirts, Mr. Okabe was watering the yard with a hose. Apparently, this heat was too much for him. He'd stripped his coveralls off both shoulders, which left him naked to the waist, and there was a can of beer at his feet. When we hailed him from a distance, he called back, "Hey! Hot as hell out here." Then he glanced our way, noticed Sayuri, and reacted with surprise.

Sayuri gave a slow, polite bow. "Good afternoon. I'm sorry to intrude like this."

"No, uh, 'scuse me..." Looking more flustered than I'd ever seen him, Mr. Okabe shoved his arms through the sleeves of his coveralls and yanked up the zipper. "Uh, thanks for always looking out for my two idiots there..."

I saw Mr. Okabe's face soften and turn a little red.

Oh, come on...

I wanted to snap at him, but I kept it to myself.

Having gotten our share of the ice pops, Takuya and I were leaning against the big tree in the center of the yard. Once we got into the shade, it was cool all of a sudden. We weren't the only ones taking shelter there; a little stray cat that lived under the eaves of the factory was rolling around, scratching his back on the grass. When we approached, he flinched, but promptly relaxed again and returned to scratching his back.

As I nibbled on my ice pop, I watched Mr. Okabe in the distance. He was immersed in an intense conversation with Sayuri, with that same moonstruck look on his face.

"So about Mr. Okabe..." I said to Takuya absently.

"Huh?"

"Is he single?"

"I heard a rumor he was divorced."

"I kinda get that."

I wasn't sure whether it was because he was restless or because being around a young woman was making him nervous, but Mr. Okabe kept scratching the

back of his head with one hand. Sayuri giggled, but I couldn't tell whether what Mr. Okabe was saying was funny or whether she found Mr. Okabe himself so amusing.

"He's weird, huh...?"

After I said it, I got the feeling that the way I'd said it hadn't been friendly enough. Something about it felt wrong.

Takuya bit off a sliver of flavored ice, then tossed it to the cat. The cat flinched again, then timidly came closer and started to eat it.

"Whoa, the little guy's eating it," Takuya said, surprised even though he was the one who'd given it to him.

"Weird cat," I muttered. The word really wasn't anywhere near gentle enough.

When we opened the big door of the hangar at the abandoned station, Sayuri spotted the occupant of the gloomy shed, and she ran inside. Then she turned back and stared at us, her already large eyes growing even rounder.

"Oh, wow... An airplane?!"

"That's right," Takuya answered calmly.

"You're making this all by yourselves?" Sayuri asked, looking at me.

"Yeah. We've been building it since the summer of year two, little by little. We've been working part-time at that factory, getting the components, and getting advice from Mr. Okabe. Right?"

"Mm-hmm." Takuya nodded.

"It's nowhere near done yet, though," I muttered, as if she couldn't see that herself.

Sayuri went up to the plane with its half-applied exterior and slowly reached out. Then she caught herself and withdrew her hand. "Can I touch it?"

"You could even slap it around a little and it wouldn't break," Takuya said.

Softly, Sayuri touched the nanonet exterior with the tip of her middle finger.

I was watching her closely, and something happened. I didn't know exactly

what, but it was something. The moment her fingertip touched the plane, Sayuri's entire body trembled as if she'd gotten an electric shock. Startled, she yanked her hand away.

"H..."

Hey, are you okay? I started to say it, but I broke off. Sayuri had laid both her palms on the plane, feeling its cool texture. Then she stepped closer, closed her eyes, and almost nestled against it. I heard her sigh.

Sayuri, in her white sailor uniform, was pressing her cheek to the pure-white wing.

In that moment, the two white figures looked like one entity to me, like separated twins who'd just found each other engaged in a wordless conversation. The plane of metal and plastic seemed like a living creature.

It felt like all our blood, sweat, and tears making this thing were all for her sake, and it astonished me. I was almost deluded into thinking this whole thing was the result of a divine revelation, that fate or something like it had ordered us to make an airplane for her.

I was just a little freaked out, and I turned to Takuya. He'd switched on the modem, hooked it to a notebook computer, and was booting it up. Silently, I pinched his shirtsleeve and tugged on it. He turned to me, his eyes silently asking, *What gives?* Then he spotted Sayuri, and his eyes widened.

Sayuri's eyes opened, just a little.

"Wow...", she whispered, like she was telling a secret. "This is... This really is incredible."

Soft as her voice was, I heard the words as if they'd been spoken right next to my ear. I felt goose bumps all across my skin.

It was all I could do to stammer out a thank-you for what she'd said.

We couldn't bring ourselves to start working and leave Sayuri on her own, so that day, we didn't touch the plane. Takuya, Sayuri, and I sat on one of the abandoned station's platforms, throwing rocks into the lake, gazing at the cumulonimbus clouds that lurked in the distance, and idly cooling off in the

evening. Sayuri said she wanted to try fishing, so we got poles and lures from the hangar and taught her how to cast. She didn't catch a single fish, but...

"It's finally where I want it to go," she said, sounding satisfied.

I lay in the shade on the platform, gazing at the sky. The sun gradually sloped downward, and the sky had begun to take on a reddish tinge. Two contrails stretched across it, headed southeast. Takuya, right next to me, was reading a book. Sayuri had taken off her shoes and socks, seated herself on the edge of the concrete, and was stirring up the surface of the water directly below her with her feet.

"It's so open up here...," she said. "There's nobody around. Say, how did you find out about this place?"

"It's a long story," I told her.

"You can't sum it up?"

"Short version, it was coincidence."

"Don't you think it's a little like a place in a fairy tale?"

"A fairy tale...?" Takuya looked up from his book.

"Uh-huh. One of the ones from England or northern Europe. You're walking through the woods, and you wander into this mysterious place, unknown to anyone but you. Fairies lived there long ago, but they're gone now."

"Hmm." Takuya nodded vaguely.

"What happens after you wander in?" I asked.

"You can't leave, of course," Sayuri answered nonchalantly. "People like that go missing. They're spirited away. They live their whole lives fishing and gathering nuts and things in the abandoned fairy village."

"...That doesn't sound so great," I said.

"Really?"

"It does seem like something out of a storybook, though," Takuya said.

"Really...?" Sayuri seemed faintly discontented. "I'd love to wander into a strange other world."

“You’d be in trouble if you couldn’t leave,” Takuya pointed out. “It’s fine now, but this place gets buried in snow in the winter. You wouldn’t be able to go anywhere, and that hangar gets really drafty. You’d never be able to live in it.”

Sayuri’s small lips pouted. “That’s fine. You don’t have to be so realistic about it. I’m just imagining.”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” Takuya nodded.

“Besides, with that airplane, you could fly out whenever you wanted, couldn’t you?” Sayuri’s eyes widened as if she’d suddenly thought of something. “Say, when will it be finished?”

I resettled myself on the concrete, cross-legged, and stretched my back. “We’d really like to finish up during summer vacation. Problem is...”

Takuya finished the sentence for me. “That’s probably not going to work out. It looks like we’re going to need a lot more time. We’ll aim to have it done before the end of the year.”

“I see... That’s still a long ways away...”

I heard a rumble of thunder, distant and faint. I looked around, scanning the sky. The thunderheads that had billowed up like cream in the sky to the north were now a dark gray.

Those thunderclouds were right by the tower. They coiled around its lower section, slowly traveling east. If anyone was over there, I thought, the heavy rain and lightning was probably giving them a really rough time right about now.

“Where are you going to go in that plane?” Sayuri asked.

“To the tower,” I told her.

Something jabbed me in the shoulder hard. Takuya was grimacing, and I realized I’d made a huge slip. I’d been watching the tower, and the question had been so natural that I just answered. *Shoot*, I thought, and I tried to repair the damage, but it was too late.

“The tower? You mean the Union’s tower?” Sayuri leaned forward suddenly.

For a fraction of a second, Takuya and I looked at each other. It was a certain

sort of confirmation. Then we turned to Sayuri and nodded in unison. “Yeah.”

“We think it should be possible to fly there in about forty minutes,” Takuya said.

“The problem is how to get across the border. We’ve got an idea there, too, though,” I said.

“That’s amazing... Really?” Even after she’d heard about our plan, Sayuri didn’t get worried or start trying to lecture us; she just listened with childlike delight and occasionally said, “Wow, that’s so neat!” Before long, we were relaxed and really opening up to her.

“That’s amazing; you’re so lucky. Hokkaido...”

And so I said what you’re supposed to say at times like these:

“Do you want to come along, Sawatari?”

“Huh? Can I?”

I nodded immediately. At the exact same time, Takuya said, “Yeah.”

“Really? Yes, I’ll go. I want to go.” Sayuri came right up to me, walking on her knees, then plopped down to sit with her legs splayed in an M-shape. “Oh, wow, thank you!”

“We might fall out of the sky before we get there, though,” Takuya said.

“It’s fine. We won’t fall.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I just know,” she said without artifice, and somehow, the prophecy felt like one we could count on. Our plane wouldn’t fall, because she believed it wouldn’t. “Promise, okay?”

“Promise what?” I asked.

“Yeah. Promise you’ll take me to Hokkaido. Please.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

“It’s a promise, then,” Takuya said.

“No matter *what*,” Sayuri pressed us again.

Her eagerness made me genuinely happy, and it felt like a promise worth keeping. I got the urge to give her a little extra.

“If you’re going to go that far, we should do something special to set it in stone.”

“Like what?”

“The plane doesn’t have a name yet. It’s okay, right, Takuya?”

“Mm-hmm.” He nodded.

“You think of one, Sawatari.”

“Huh?! But, I mean, that’s not... It’s your plane...”

“You have to, or else we’ll forget,” Takuya threatened jokingly.

“What?! No!” she said instantly. “But I’m not sure I can come up with one all of a sudden...”

“It doesn’t have to be right now.”

“Wait, I’ll think about it. Ummm...”

Sayuri thought hard for a little while. She tried out various words, saying them silently to herself. Finally, she murmured one that didn’t sound like anything I was used to hearing.

“It’s a word that came up in a book I read once. It meant ‘white wings.’ *Velaciela*.”

That became the name of the promise.

After that, the three of us walked across the field through a deep-red sunset, side by side.

We went down the sloping mountain road, stumbling now and then. By the time we were back at Emishi Manufacturing, the sun was almost down, and it was a relief to see the fluorescent light filtering through the windows of the factory and the office.

After we stopped in to say good-bye to Mr. Okabe, we cut through the Ookawadai shopping street to Tsugaru-Hamana Station. Sayuri was taking an inbound train home to Naka-Oguni, so we saw her off at the platform. Even

after she boarded the train and sat down in a box seat, she kept waving to us through the window.

After the train pulled away, Takuya and I relocated to the next platform over, then boarded the train to Minmaya, which arrived a few minutes later.

“I’m glad you asked her to come,” I said. Takuya nodded in heartfelt agreement.

The fans on the ceiling spun, and Takuya and I naturally slipped into silence. Takuya gazed absently out the mirrorlike train window. I watched one of the fans, for no reason in particular, and took a deep, contented breath.

It wasn’t Sayuri’s fairy tale, but I felt as if the tranquil time at that abandoned station, and the gentle silence of this train, would go on forever. Tomorrow, and the day after, and next year, and after that.

I had always longed to reach that tower beyond the clouds on my own, but from that day on, it was the site of an important promise to me.

“*Promise, okay?*” she’d said.

We’d nodded without hesitation, and in that moment, we had nothing to fear. Or so we thought.

As a matter of fact, the world and history had begun changing, very close by. But right then, my world was the nighttime smells of the train, my trust for my friend, and that electric sense in the air that came from Sayuri’s presence.

Or at least, that was what I wished for.

9

US and Union Militaries Clash Off Tsugaru Coast

Before dawn on the fifteenth, an armed conflict between the US-Japanese and Union militaries occurred in the neutral zone extending from the waters far off the coast of the Tsugaru Strait to the 42nd and 41st parallels.

According to an announcement from the US Army press secretary, the

clash was accidental and on a very small scale. There were no casualties among US-Japanese personnel. Whether there were casualties on the Union side is unknown.

Union-Related Organizations on Alert; 3,300 Personnel Stationed

In response to the US-Japan/Union armed conflict, with the goal of deterring operations by domestic terrorist organizations, the Metropolitan Police Department has announced that it will station 3,300 security personnel at organizations and facilities with close ties to the Union.

In protest of the invasion of territorial waters by a Union marine patrol ship in February of this year, the Uilta Liberation Front, a domestic anti-Union terrorist group, has issued an advance notice of bombings targeting Union corporations. There is some danger that they may be planning similar crimes due to the recent armed conflict, and the police department is tightening security.

I found out about those reports on a newspaper's website. "The waters far off the coast of the Tsugaru Strait" was the ocean I'd been watching from the abandoned station yesterday. Had there been a battle out there after we'd gone home? We'd been so close to the center of international attention. It was extremely weird realizing how blissfully ignorant we'd been, learning about it later from the news. Something huge had happened in the world and in history, right in our backyard. But (at least at the time) the only world I could grasp was small and limited, a modest, palm-sized thing.

As soon as school let out, Takuya and I went to work at Emishi Manufacturing. When we went into the locker room to change into our coveralls, Satou came by and told us that some trouble had come up suddenly, so no work for us today. When we offered to make tea or do anything else they could use some help with, he kicked us out. "Some things we can't let you kids hear. Get lost already."

"They only treat us like kids when it's convenient for them. We came all the way here! Seriously, what's their problem?" I groused.

Takuya was lost in thought. "...Oh, sorry, I wasn't listening."

"Satou and the other guys are having some sort of trouble," I said. "Wanna go

spy on the office for a little?”

“No way. Do *not* do that.”

Takuya shot down the suggestion so quickly and so harshly, I flinched.

“Geez. What’s the matter?”

“I don’t think this factory is what it looks like. I’ve thought so for a while now,” he said, brooding. “We shouldn’t get in too deep.”

10

Two days later, Takuya stopped by my class.

Since the beginning of our third year, Takuya and I had had an unspoken rule that unless we needed something, we wouldn’t visit the other’s class. We’d be together outside school once class was over anyway, and if we went out of our way to hang out together at school as well, we’d end up neglecting our other relationships.

That’s why it was weird when he showed up during lunch.

“C’mere a second,” he said, then took me over to Sayuri’s desk and told her he had a favor to ask.

“A favor? What is it?”

“I hear the music club isn’t meeting today.”

“Uh-huh. The current members are going to a joint practice session at the city gym. There’s a recital coming up.”

“So the music room is empty. Hey, Sawatari. You brought your violin, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Yes.” Sayuri guessed what he wanted from the way the conversation was going. “Shirakawa, don’t tell me...”

“I’d really like to hear you play.”

“What?!” Sayuri came very close to shouting, then remembered where she was and lowered her voice again. “No, I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s embarrassing.”

“No, it’s not,” Takuya declared as if that was enough to settle it.

“Why do you want to hear it? My playing isn’t worth all the trouble,” Sayuri said.

“Do I need a reason? Besides, I won’t know what it’s worth until I’ve heard it.”

Inwardly, I was seriously impressed with Takuya’s aggressive negotiation tactics. I was pretty sure I couldn’t get away with talking like that. His relentless intensity could move mountains.

I worried he was being a little too pushy, though, so I decided to jump in.

“Just one piece is fine; play the one you’re best at. You can pretend we accidentally heard one of your regular practices. How would that be?” Then I added, “I mean, but if you seriously don’t want to, we won’t force you.”

“What would you do if I said I would never do it?” Sayuri asked us.

I glanced at Takuya. His expression said, *This one’s all yours*, so I thought for a little before I responded.

“...Mope, I guess.”

“I really have to play...?” Limply, Sayuri buried her face in her desk in a gesture of surrender.

With the faintest trace of victory in his expression, Takuya said, “Okay. After school, we’ll come to the music room.”

As he was leaving, he elbowed my arm lightly and murmured, “Nice assist.”

When we opened the music room’s heavy wooden sliding door, Sayuri was already there, leaning against the grand piano, gazing at the floor.

The window was wide open, and a breeze blew in, rippling the white curtain. She’d acted so embarrassed that I’d thought we might have to tough out the heat in a closed room, so that was a relief. She probably didn’t care if people outside heard her, just as long as they didn’t know who was playing. The music club had apparently rehearsed a little before the joint practice session; the

desks and chairs had all been moved to one side of the room. Takuya and I grabbed some steel and wood chairs from a spot by the wall, found a place that looked promising, and sat down.

“I’m really not very good, you know,” Sayuri said.

“That’s fine. I’ve never seen someone play a violin in person before. I won’t be able to tell whether you’re good or bad,” Takuya said, which didn’t exactly seem tactful.

“And that’s not the reason we want to listen anyway,” I said. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

“Urgh, I’m nervous.”

Sayuri had been nearly hiding in the shadow of the piano, but she timidly came out, holding her violin by its neck. Standing in the center of the room, she put some sheet music on the music stand. The wind blew in, ruffling the pages, so she clipped them down. The golden light from the late afternoon sun streamed in through the window. From where we sat, Sayuri seemed to be glowing in the light behind her. When she tucked her hair behind her ear, the gesture showed up as a shadow in the sunset.

“What’s the name of the piece?” Takuya asked.

“A Distant Calling Voice,” she said. “Listen, please don’t laugh at me. I’ll get stage fright. Don’t clap, either. Also, I’d rather you didn’t really look at me.”

Takuya opened his mouth to crack some sort of joke, but he stopped himself. “All right.”

Sayuri gave a sigh.

Then she began to play.

As Sayuri had said, I don’t think her performance was all that skillful, but she played the piece very conscientiously. She never got careless or sloppy. Like Takuya, I knew almost nothing about music, but I’m sure her performance was a faithful one. It felt as if the entire melody, every pause, had her full attention.

The song she played was a very simple violin solo. Maybe it was supposed to have a piano accompaniment or something, but today, of course, we had only

the violin. And she was the only one I'd wanted to hear, so that was perfect.

The tune was gentle, tender, maybe written for singing aloud. Somehow, the melody made me think of the color of the sky at this time of year. Blue, with low, scattered clouds drifting in it, when maybe something transparent might come sprinkling down from it.

As her performance entered the second half, while its style remained as grand as before, the melody picked up a faint tinge of sadness. It reminded me of the setting sun, when the clear light begins taking on warm undertones. Tranquil but uneasy.

Right around then, she slowed the tempo of her violin slightly, and the song became bolder. The golden, slanting sunlight streaming in through the windows seemed to be the melody itself made visible. I sensed it flowing into me, bringing me closer to her. The psychological distance between us had shrunk in a short amount of time—but that was only an illusion, of course. Still, her heart had been made audible, made visible, and drinking in the fact transported me.

The piece ended in a strange way—it just broke off without warning, without a sense that it had landed. I was uncomfortable there while the last notes lingered in the air, but then it suddenly made sense. Its failure to come to rest seemed a lot like Sayuri herself. Something about her didn't feel quite real, as if she was something from a dream, a sort of illusion...

After that, Takuya, Sayuri, and I went home together. We locked the music room, walked through the empty halls, and returned the key to its hook in the faculty room. We changed into our outdoor shoes in the main entrance, cut across the athletic field, and boarded an outbound train from the station platform.

Just before I climbed into the train, I looked at the tower, the way I always did. Some days, the Union's tower looked incredibly close. Today was one of them; I could see it falling down on my head at any minute.

The whole way home, even after Sayuri left the train at Naka-Oguni, the echoes of her song lingered in me. Over and over, I remembered the way she'd walk ahead of us, turning restlessly to look back, and the view of her small knees when she sat in the opposite half of the box seat on the train, and the

way her head tilted when she played the violin. That night was a sweltering, tropical one, but I was so happy I slept like a rock.

11

In the Tohoku region, summer vacations are short. The longer winter vacations balance everything out, but I still felt like we got the short end of the stick.

After the first term closing ceremony signaling the beginning of that brief summer vacation, Takuya, Sayuri, and I went to the abandoned station, still wearing our school uniforms. It was a hot, breezy, incredibly fine day. Every so often, the smell of sunbaked grass got annoyingly pungent, but a breath of wind would promptly blow through and sweep away the heat.

When I squinted, I could see a heat haze like a lens distorting the air.

Somewhere along the way, Sayuri had started joining Takuya and I when we met up on the way home from school. She also came to the abandoned station quite a bit. I'd started to accept this as a matter of course.

The work on the plane was going more smoothly than we'd expected. Miyagawa had found us a used superconducting motor for cheap somewhere, so we had almost all the parts we needed. That was a real shot in the arm, and we'd spend every day absorbed in our work until late. We'd finished machining the transforming wings, and from the outside, the plane looked almost complete. Now all we needed to do was work out the fine details of the control system. Plus, although it was jumping the gun a bit, we needed to draw up a flight plan. If all went well, we might actually be able to fly by the end of summer vacation.

"The nanonet won't reflect radar. Do we really need to be that cautious about this?" I peeked at the laptop Takuya was holding on his knees.

The screen showed a map of southern Hokkaido that he'd downloaded from the Internet. I didn't know where he found it, but it was high-definition. If you clicked on the map, it showed 3D-modeled topography of the mountains.

"Well, yeah, but it's not a stealth plane. Besides, we're flying through the

neutral zone. Even if it's got a nanonet exterior, they're gonna find us. Either the Union army or... No, if we fly wrong, the US military will find us before the Union does."

Sayuri was out in the sun, leaning against the wall of the hangar and reading a book. At first, she'd hung out and tried listening to our conversation, but she'd given up fast on the technobabble and wandered away.

Takuya and I were in the hangar, with the big bay door wide open. A strong, pleasant breeze was blowing in.

"I think we really will just have to fly as low as possible. Camouflage ourselves with the waves and the terrain. If we leave early in the morning, we should be able to hide in the mist, too; that'll make us harder to spot visually. Once we're in Ezo, we can just go by that map and fly between the mountains." I pointed at the 3D mountains on the screen.

"Yeah, but I've got a bad feeling about flying by this data. It's an old map, and we won't actually know what the landscape looks like until we're there. Once we're over land, I think we'll have to take the risk and fly higher."

"But the Union's radar won't pick us up over land, either. What they're focused on is the neutral zone. The Velaciela's small, and if we fly really high, the shadow we leave on the ground will be smaller than a songbird."

"Yeah, probably. If we do that, then we really should switch the propulsion as we hit land. We'll blast over the ocean in one burst, then fly quietly over land."

"Right."

After that, we went back to work. Takuya was putting together a flight control program on his computer, and I was busily soldering the substrate. The light clicking of his keystrokes echoed in the room, while a faint thread of white smoke and the smell from the melting line of solder rose from beneath my hands.

This complicated work is a real pain unless I get totally lost in it, so I focused on it until nothing else existed but my hands. Before long, I lost all sense of time. The next thing I knew, I'd made a startling amount of progress.

Out of nowhere, I sensed something I couldn't describe. Maybe a noise had

reached me subconsciously.

Outside?

I put down the soldering iron, stretched my back, stood up, and went out.

The weather was as beautiful as ever. The sun was so fierce that it stung my skin when I stepped out into it. The green of the grass was vivid and almost blinding under that intense light. The clouds drifted slowly, and the wind was kicking up waves on the surface of the lake...

And what I saw next made me go cold. A shudder ran through me before what I'd seen even registered in my conscious mind.

The three station platforms were in front of the hangar, with the wooden pedestrian bridge linking them. Since it had been abandoned and exposed to the elements when it was still under construction, there were holes in the floor, and parts of the walls were missing.

In one of the spots where the wall was gone, Sayuri was hanging by one hand, ready to fall at any moment.

The lake was right under her. The rails had been submerged.

"Sawatari!"

On reflex, I broke into a run.

I jumped over the waterway, then dashed into the station yard. My eyes never left Sayuri.

She was dangling from the edge of a floorboard by one hand. From time to time, she squeezed her eyes shut, and the hand supporting her weight trembled. I saw right away what must have happened. The floor over there had been eroded by the rain, and it was falling to pieces. Sayuri had probably gone up on the bridge to look through the broken wall at the distant view when the floor gave way.

"Hang on!"

I ran up the steps of the pedestrian bridge. The places I stepped on cracked and creaked. When I reached the top, I sprinted over to the far edge, where Sayuri was.

“It’s...okay. It’s not that high.”

Sayuri was looking down anxiously. Just as she spoke, the board she was clinging to cracked audibly and broke off.

I was almost on top of it when I saw it break.

She’s gonna fall!

Losing its purchase, her hand fell—

But I caught her wrist!

I’d practically dived to grab it.

I knew instinctively that this was no time for restraint, so I grabbed it hard enough to crush it. Her weight suddenly came to bear on me with a tug that threatened to pop my shoulder out of its socket. Sayuri was very thin, only around a hundred pounds, but that was still a lot of weight to support one-handed. The lake was right in front of me, reflecting the color of the sky, and I was leaning out into empty space as if I was standing on a diving board at the pool. Sayuri’s pale, anxious face looked straight up at me from in front of the cerulean water. I couldn’t blame her. But finally...

I made it!

A sort of shiver traveled up my arm and spread all through me, and I started to sweat.

As she hung there, dangling by her wrist below the sky, Sayuri glanced at me for a fraction of a second.

Her expression relaxed into something almost dazed.

“We did this...before...”

I know she said that, but I barely heard her. I was too swamped with relief to pay attention. A sigh escaped me.

“Phew... Made it. Hang on, I’ll...”

Pull you up is what I was about to say, but just then, the boards under me snapped. My sense of balance went strange. The glittering water was suddenly in my face, and then I felt it all around me.

I'd fallen into the lake. The water was cloudy with sand, and I couldn't see a thing. I panicked for a second, but then my feet found the bottom, and I managed to push my head through the surface. At almost the same moment, Sayuri poked her head up out of the water. When we stood up straight, the water only came to our waists.

Takuya finally noticed what was happening. He jogged to the edge and stood on the rocks by the water. When I looked around, the rocks he was on seemed like the easiest place to get back up on land. Sayuri and I headed over there, sloshing through the water.

"Are you okay?" Takuya asked. "Nobody's hurt?"

"No, just wet," Sayuri said. Then she smiled at me. "I'm sorry, Fujisawa. Thank you."

"Well, I guess it was a good thing you were over water." Takuya held out his right hand, intending to help Sayuri up. She reached out to take it.

And I was hit by the urge to prank him—but to be honest, part of me also didn't want to let him hold Sayuri's hand that easily. I grabbed Takuya's hand before Sayuri could and pulled it.

"Waugh, hey— Aaaaaah!"

Takuya tried to plant his feet at the water's edge, attempting to recover his balance, but he fell in with a huge splash.

I cackled. "Trying to stay the only dry one around here, huh? Some friend you are!"

"What the heck was that for?!"

Takuya leaped up out of the water and shoved me down, and I went all the way under again. When I got my feet back under me and poked my head up out of the lake, Takuya splashed water into my face with perfect aim.

"Look at you," he said. "You're totally soaked."

"Yeah, just like you."

"Shut up."

For the past couple of minutes, I hadn't been able to stop laughing. "Sorry. I needed to drag you down with the rest of us; I couldn't help it."

"You what?!"

"C'mon, don't get so mad."

"Why shouldn't I be mad?!"

Takuya dunked me again. Using the buoyancy of the water, I jumped on his head and dunked him right back. From underwater, he knocked my legs out from under me. I wiped out magnificently, then floated on the surface.

"And don't get back up. Come on, Sawatari, let's go." Takuya started walking toward the bank. Sayuri had started giggling.

"Hey, Takuya, wait up! Sawatari, tell him to stop being so grumpy."

"I'm sorry, Shirakawa... Mmph." Sayuri was still laughing, although her mouth was closed.

"What is it, Sawatari?" Takuya asked.

"Watching you and Fujisawa made me a little jealous."

"Of what?" Takuya and I spoke in unison, looking blank.

Fortunately, the weather was good, and the scorching midsummer sky broiled the ground like a stove. The three of us lay on one of the abandoned station's platforms, letting our clothes dry while we were wearing them. After we'd spent about two hours like that, dozing and rolling over from time to time, our clothes were almost back to normal.

Finally, the sun began to set. From here, the evening sun always looked bloodred. Its ruddy light was reflected in Sayuri's leather shoes, which were propped up against a pillar to point at the sky.

"When I saw you hanging there, Sawatari, I really freaked out," I said.

"I knew it was falling to pieces and probably wasn't safe, but...I wanted to take a little walk and clear my mind."

"We let you get bored, huh?" Takuya looked apologetic. "We did kinda ditch you to work the whole time."

“No, that wasn’t what I meant. It’s fine.” Sayuri hastily shook her head. “I wanted to see the view from somewhere high. I also wanted to get a good look at the tower, so...”

“Ah.” Takuya nodded.

“You can see it really well from here, can’t you? The view isn’t just clear—it’s picture-perfect. I got a little lost in it, so I sat on the edge of the bridge and let my mind wander. I was sitting there for a long time. Maybe it was hard on the floorboards.”

Sayuri was choosing neutral phrases, but I wondered if she was deliberately avoiding the insinuation that she was heavy.

But Sayuri was so thin that absolutely no one would ever have thought that. If you asked me, she needed to *gain* weight, for her own sake. I couldn’t forget how slender her wrist had been when I’d grabbed it; it had felt ready to break.

I sat up, making my abs do most of the work, and studied Sayuri out of the corner of my eye.

She was sitting with her legs outstretched and her hands on her knees. She’d taken off her socks and shoes, and her bare feet were exposed to the red sunlight. Her legs were long and slim, and my heart skipped a beat when I realized how beautiful their curves were. For a little while, I stole glances at her calves and at her thighs in her short skirt.

Sayuri was gazing absently at her toes. Then, for no particular reason, she touched her big toe with her index finger. A ladybug that had been flying near her for the last minute or so came to rest on her fingertip. Little by little, the bug began crawling up Sayuri’s finger, and she held very still so as not to frighten it.

“Back there, just for a moment, I was dreaming.”

“Dreaming?” I asked. “About what?”

“Hmm...oh, I forget. Probably about that tower.”

“It doesn’t look real, does it...?” Takuya said, sighing. “The Union is amazing.”

I glanced at the tower, letting my gaze slide up it from its base.

“It looks like the tip of that tower might be connected to some other world.”

The top was too hazy to see. No matter how good the weather was, I’d never managed to catch a glimpse. It was just too tall.

From the sky, I heard the noise of an airplane.

The ladybug was still on Sayuri’s hand, crouched near the base of her index finger. To me, it looked like a red jewel on a ring.

Then it took flight.

Sayuri sighed; she’d been holding still so as not to scare it off. She leaned back, bracing her hands on the concrete, and looked up at the sky.

“The sun’s taking forever to set, isn’t it...?”

It really is, I thought.

The light around us had taken on its reddish cast some time ago, and yet the sun was still above the horizon, over the water.

Twilight is really just a moment or two, or it should be, but this one felt as if it was stretching into an eternity.

“Feels like it’s been sunset all day,” I said.

Sayuri looked at me, and I saw her eyes in that red evening light.

In that moment, time stopped—

—and I saw a vision.

In that fleeting dream, I was Sayuri, and Sayuri was sitting on the edge of the pedestrian bridge with its broken wall, gazing at the tower. The wind blew toward us from the tower, whipping up waves on the lake.

Before long, the colors of everything she saw changed, as if they’d been painted over with the stroke of a brush. The color of the sky went dull, like an old photograph. There was an odd, metallic sound. A myriad of ominous contrails stretched across the sky, enough to cover it.

And then the world turned inside out.

Up became down, left became right, the foreground became the background.

Or maybe the inversion happened to her.

She could see a swarm of tiny lights, like sparks, bursting around the tower. Sayuri wondered, mystified, what they could be.

I knew. It was a battle.

War.

There was a war happening over there.

I watched it without any particularly deep emotion. Since this was a dream, I couldn't think very well.

And then *it* happened.

Near the base of the tower, there was a flash. It was like a camera flash, but dozens of times more powerful.

A moment later—

The tower...

...was at the center of a massive explosion.

An ill-omened, terrible crimson radiated out from that flash like the spokes of a wheel, and the whole sky turned red—the bright shade first turned even more vivid, then faded to something darker.

The tower was shattering into pieces. Broken, it slowly fell out of the sky, burning all the while.

Everything was breaking, disappearing, vanishing, and I was aware that I was seeing the end of the world. *So the apocalypse is as red as paint*, I thought, quietly impressed.

The air rumbled. Then the blast wind came.

The heat scorched me while my hair and clothes whipped in the wind. I was nearly sent flying. The pedestrian bridge warped, creaked, swayed.

And the floorboard that had been jutting out into the sky broke.

I'd been sitting on it, and my sense of balance was gone. Falling. I was falling. Sayuri was falling. Oh. The tower had been holding up the sky. Now that it was

gone, the sky was falling. Of course; how obvious.

I fell and fell, forever and ever...

I had that sense of free-falling, the kind that hits you sometimes when you're sleeping, and I jumped. I looked around. I was on the platform at the abandoned station, gazing at the setting sun with Takuya and Sayuri.

I felt as if I'd been dreaming for just a moment. About something very important.

"I had this dream, for just a second," I said.

"What about?" Sayuri asked.

I couldn't remember. "I forgot."

"The sun's taking forever to set, isn't it...?" she said.

I didn't remember the daydream until much later, years later, after everything was over and the damage had been done. I always remember the important stuff when it's too late to save anything.

Even after our clothes and shoes were fully dry, we kept gazing at the eternal sunset. It really felt as if this twilight would last forever. I wanted it to.

But slow as it was, the big sun sank steadily in the west. It touched the waterline, then finally slipped out of sight entirely, leaving only a vague blur of light low in the sky.

Our surroundings had turned dim and gloomy. Takuya and I looked around, then got up, although it wasn't clear which of us had moved first. However, Sayuri kept sitting where she was, holding still, her hands clasped around her knees. "Oh, I don't want to go home," she said.

"It's summer vacation," Takuya told her. "This place is ours till summer's over. Just come back again tomorrow. And the day after. Come here whenever you like. Every day will be like today, for as long as you want."

Sayuri looked up, and the way she smiled just then reminded me of how a cloud could change shape.

That really was a special summer.

Even now, I can't free myself from the memory of that day.

It was the last day we saw Sayuri.

12

Summer vacation had begun. Every day, Takuya and I worked at Emishi Manufacturing from morning till past noon, then went to the abandoned station and worked on the Velaciela until nightfall.

When we parted ways on the day of the closing ceremony, Sayuri had said she'd come over every day, but she didn't show up even once. We didn't know what had happened, and we felt a little abandoned. However, we had a real airplane just days away from flying, right in front of us, and we threw ourselves into the project.

Almost there, I said to myself silently, over and over. We'd be able to fly soon. Then we could go there.

To the place we promised.

Sayuri had said she wanted to go to the Union's tower. When I said we'd take her, her round eyes had grown even rounder with surprise. She'd insisted that she wanted us to take her along. Insisted that we promise, with so much urgency in her voice. Of course we'd take her, and we'd be ready soon. Somewhere along the way, that thought had pushed our loneliness and questions to the back burner.

Takuya ended up working on nothing but the control program for a full two weeks. There was a part that required several complicated processes, and it was giving him a hard time. We'd divided the program development work between the two of us, but I wasn't up to it, so I left the software development to him and focused exclusively on the hardware.

On August 6, we had a mid-vacation school day. Sayuri didn't come.

"I wonder if she's not feeling good," Takuya said. When he mentioned it, I remembered that she had been sort of frail.

"Well, she did fall into the water." I thought back to the day of the closing

ceremony. “Maybe she got sick.”

“Could be.” Takuya took a drag on his cigarette, grimacing at a bad taste in his mouth.

For the week after that, we were absorbed in working on the plane again. It was steadily getting closer to completion, but we didn’t manage to finish it by the end of summer vacation, the way we’d hoped we would. Sayuri still hadn’t stopped by.

On August 13, the new term began. Sayuri wasn’t in the ranks at the opening ceremony. Even after homeroom began, her seat stayed empty, and I started to understand that something was wrong.

My homeroom teacher was a young woman named Ms. Sasaki. She stood in front of the class, and even before she offered a typical greeting, she said she had something important to tell us.

“Due to a sudden family situation, Sayuri Sawatari transferred schools during summer vacation,” she reported stiffly. Maybe she wasn’t used to making these kinds of announcements.

The classroom buzzed.

For a little while, I wasn’t able to process what she’d said. As the message gradually sank into my brain, confusion kicked up inside me like a whirlwind. I stared at my pencil case on my desk. It abruptly receded into the distance—and then there it was again, right under my nose. My sense of perspective was scrambled. I felt dizzy.

I closed my eyes, pressed the spot between my eyebrows, then pushed my middle fingers against my temples. *Hey, calm down*, I told myself. *How the hell am I supposed to stay calm?!* my brain yelled back.

“Transferred?”

I murmured the word to myself. It felt so unreal.

This couldn’t be happening.

That day was all complicated announcements and homework submissions, and then school was over. I immediately went to Takuya’s class and grabbed

him.

“That’s insane,” he said. “What family situation?”

“I don’t know.”

“What school did she transfer to?”

“I don’t know that, either. They didn’t tell us in homeroom.”

“Let’s go find out.” He strode off toward the faculty room.

When Takuya opened the wooden sliding door, his grip was tense and determined. He looked genuinely angry, and I realized I’d never seen that from him before. He went straight up to Ms. Sasaki and got right to the point.

“Tell us why Sawatari transferred schools, please.”

“Mr. Shirakawa...”

The teacher was startled by Takuya’s stony expression. When she answered, she sounded as bewildered as she had in class when she told us about the transfer. “Her parents told me it was due to a family situation, but I...”

“What kind of situation?” Takuya asked again. “It’s not normal for a student to switch schools out of the blue, without explanation.”

“The school didn’t ask; we didn’t want to intrude. Listen, Mr. Shirakawa...”

“Tell us which school she transferred to, then.”

She was starting to panic, just a little.

“Well, you see...we don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You have to know. There’s a whole process; you can’t transfer a kid without notifying the other school.”

“You’re right,” Ms. Sasaki said. “Ordinarily. But for whatever reason, this time is an exception. It’s causing trouble for us as well. The school has no idea where Miss Sawatari has transferred to. The vice principal is running all over the place trying to...”

“But...,” I muttered.

“That’s completely ridiculous,” Takuya said. As we left the faculty room, he

said it again: “That’s ridiculous. There’s no way.”

I’d been in a daze ever since I heard the news, but I was also starting to think it wasn’t fair. And then I remembered. They’d handed out a class directory at the beginning of the first term, and it was still in my bag; I had it with me. Of course Sayuri’s address was in it.

I found the crumpled-up directory in the bottom of my bag.

“Takuya, let’s just go ask them.”

And that was how we took a train to Naka-Oguni.

We’d used Takuya’s laptop to access an online address lookup service, typed in the address for Sayuri’s house, and pulled up a map. Her house was near the station, along a major road, and it seemed like it would be easy to find.

And it was. The house was big, with a spacious garden. The property was twice the size of the lots of the houses across the street and on either side of it. It had a high wall, and the boughs of pine trees hung over the top. The building was a single-story traditional Japanese house; it seemed very old, but it was a sturdy, well-built, magnificent building. We went through the garden and pressed the bell at the front door. We could sense someone moving inside, and before long, a woman who was probably Sayuri’s mother emerged from the entryway. The front door was big, too. Sayuri’s mom didn’t look like Sayuri herself.

When we introduced ourselves as Sawatari’s friends, she was startled.

“Sayuri has friends?” she said with surprise, and I instantly didn’t like her. I hid it well, though. I think.

“That’s right,” I said politely.

“We came to say hello,” Takuya added.

Mrs. Sawatari looked as bewildered as Ms. Sasaki had. Then she told us that Sayuri had already moved to their new place.

“It was all settled very suddenly,” she said. “She was already over there before summer vacation ended... I’m very sorry she didn’t say good-bye.”

She was stiff and cold toward us—maybe it was just because two guys had

dropped by out of nowhere to visit her only daughter, but I got the feeling it wasn't.

We told her we wanted to know their new address. Or at least the name of the school she'd transferred to.

Mrs. Sawatari went quiet for a little while. Then she said that she couldn't tell us because there was "a bit of a situation."

A situation?

What's that supposed to mean?

My temper flared up, and I had the urge to grab her. I managed to stop myself at the last second, but all I could do was ask a stupid question. "What situation?"

Naturally, she wouldn't tell me.

"As it turns out, Sayuri needs to start a new life in a new environment, from scratch." Mrs. Sawatari's tone softened a little, almost apologetically. "It is really very complicated, and I can't really sum it up. The bottom line is that she needs to completely distance herself from her former environment and friends for a while. I'm sorry, but please do leave her alone."

"Did she say that's what she wants?" Takuya asked sharply.

"She didn't, but... No, she wants this, too."

Nobody with any sense would believe that answer. Takuya and I went silent, letting the question *So which is it?* roll around, unsaid. Both of us were really good at belligerent silence.

"Er, boys..." Mrs. Sawatari caved. "Would you tell me your names? Next time I see Sayuri, I'll tell her you stopped by to visit her."

We still weren't satisfied, but we weren't going to get any further with this approach, so we bowed to her and left the Sawatari residence. Takuya and I walked to the station in sullen silence, and I was struck by a sense that something didn't fit. I absently mulled over it, trying to pin down what it was. Mrs. Sawatari had said she'd tell Sayuri next time she saw her.

Maybe it was a figure of speech? But it had sounded as though Mrs. Sawatari

wasn't able to see Sayuri all that often, either.

Next time?

Where in the world had Sayuri gone?

We hurried to the hangar at the abandoned station almost as if we were fleeing to it for shelter. For a while, neither of us spoke. After that, we sluggishly started to put the finishing touches on the Velaciela.

The clicks of Takuya's keystrokes were unusually slow, and the tool holder I'd attached to my belt felt incredibly heavy. Before long, I'd lost all will to work, and I leaned against the fuselage like laundry on a rainy day.

"What 'situation'...?" I muttered. *Seriously, what is it?* I gave it a little thought, but all I could come up with were scenarios straight out of a bad soap opera.

From the other side of the plane, I heard Takuya's voice.

"Doesn't seem like money trouble. Her mother wasn't freaking out, either. At first, I thought it might be a run-of-the-mill divorce, but..."

"But then why hide where she went?"

"Exactly. So what the hell is going on?"

I had no idea, so I went quiet. Takuya fell silent, too.

We both thought in circles, imagining things at random. We had almost no information to work with, and just considering the problem wouldn't bring us any satisfactory answers. We knew that, but we couldn't get the question off our minds, and the ominous feeling just kept getting stronger.

Takuya broke the silence. "Whatever the reason is, it came out of nowhere for Sawatari, too. She didn't just run off into the night without a word."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Well, I mean... Look over here."

I went around to Takuya's side of the plane. He was looking at a spot by the wall.

Sayuri's violin case was propped against it. When we went home on the day summer vacation began, she'd left it there, saying it was too heavy and she was

tired.

“She was planning to come back here during summer vacation,” Takuya murmured.

I see...

That wasn't enough for us to decide what to do, though. Wouldn't that mean Sayuri had needed to go because of something that desperate, that serious?

We went home without making much progress on the work, and the gloom dragged on for about three days.

Finally, I got sick of feeling discouraged. My emotions were just going around in circles in a murky, undefined swamp. I wanted to get at least one or two things clear.

“Let's go to Sawatari's house again,” I told Takuya.

“Yeah... If we press them hard, we might get some new information.”

“So let's go.”

As before, we got off at Naka-Oguni Station and walked along the road.

Then Takuya and I stopped in our tracks at the exact same moment. We stood there, without saying a word, for about a minute.

The place where Sayuri's house had been was now a vacant lot.

In the hangar at the abandoned station, we said nothing. We hadn't even turned on the lights. It was a different sort of silence from that earlier one, a few days ago.

Sayuri had vanished completely.

That was what it seemed like, anyway. She hadn't “gone away.” I felt as if something huge, way too big for us, had just carried her off. *It's not fair*, I kept repeating silently. I was furious at the shapeless, imaginary thing that had kidnapped Sayuri.

But that harmed no one but me, physically and mentally. I'd get exhausted, then discouraged, and then the anger would flare up again, like some sort of spasm. The torturous cycle repeated over and over because there was nothing

specific to focus my feelings on.

It's awful, being so angry with nothing concrete to be angry at. I couldn't get rid of my ugly feelings, which meant they dragged on endlessly.

Takuya sat in a chair in front of the worktable and glared at the wall. I paced around and around the unfinished Velaciela. When the soles of my feet started to get tired, I stopped and stood still. It happened to be the very place where Sayuri had pressed her cheek against the Velaciela, enraptured, when we first showed it to her.

I stood where she'd stood then, touching the place she'd touched.

Sawatari.

What is the Velaciela supposed to do?

We promised we'd fly it with you, remember?

You're just gonna disappear and leave your Velaciela behind?

I silently asked—and I realized with shock what'd I'd said. "Your Velaciela." Somewhere along the way, I'd started building the plane not for myself, but for her. My work on the Velaciela was work toward the promise we'd made with her. Keeping the promise had been so self-evident to me that I hadn't even noticed that my motives had changed.

More than Sayuri had left us that day. My enthusiasm toward the Velaciela had deteriorated significantly, replaced by the stinging impatience of desperately chasing something irretrievable and failing to catch it.

We'd figured that we had about a week's worth of work left on the Velaciela. The next day, once school got out, Takuya and I rode the Tsugaru Line and worked on putting the finishing touches on it at the abandoned station, the way we always did. Unlike always, we were still in a funk, and the work made zero progress.

The day after that, Takuya didn't come to the abandoned station. I waited for him on the platform at Minami-Yomogita, but even after the train pulled in, I didn't see him, so I had to board the train alone. What with all the turmoil lately, maybe he'd caught a cold or something.

Alone, I touched up the Velaciela. At this stage, we were both in charge of completely separate areas, so working by myself didn't give me any real trouble. But before I was finished, the work didn't feel worthwhile anymore, so I finally stopped and spent the rest of the time throwing rocks at the lake until the sun went down.

The next day, Takuya showed up on the platform at Minami-Yomogita on schedule. He didn't seem interested in explaining yesterday's absence.

The day after that, Takuya was gone again.

The day after that one, I was the one who didn't go.

I felt guilty about it, and the following day, I was careful not to run into Takuya at school. But when Takuya didn't show up on the platform at Minami-Yomogita, selfish as it might have been, I felt like he'd let me down. Selfish, I know. When I went to the abandoned station, I saw no sign Takuya had been there yesterday. We had a notebook where we recorded our progress, and he hadn't left a note.

My sigh echoed uselessly in the deserted hangar. I was worn out. I was fully aware of that. *I want to rest a little*, I thought. I hadn't wanted a break from a project for the past several years. After all, before I'd met Takuya, I'd worked on everything to completion on my own, and it hadn't seemed at all strange to me. Now, though, being alone was just a little harder than it once was.

The next day, and the day after that, I decided against going to the abandoned station. I thought I'd change my plans and "go to work" if I ran into Takuya on the platform, but I didn't.

For about a week after that, I went to the abandoned station on and off. Even on the days when I went, I spent the time gazing absently at the sky.

The season for cultural festival prep got closer, and the school was buzzing. For some reason, our middle school held its cultural festival earlier than other schools. Come to think of it, our guerrilla flight was about this time two years ago. The memory stirred up a mix of nostalgia and bitter sadness inside me.

That day, junior members of the archery club wanted to discuss something festival-related with me, so I was late leaving school, and I ended up taking the

club train for the first time in quite a while.

Even though it wouldn't be the right time for it, out of habit, I waited for the train in my usual spot on the platform. Then, from beside me, I heard familiar footsteps and a voice I knew well, and I glanced over.

I'd recognized Takuya by his voice, but I didn't know how to react to the cute girl on his arm. It was Kana Matsuura, a junior member of the skating club. Despite the intense heat of the end of summer, Matsuura was cuddled up next to Takuya. They obviously weren't just members of the same club who'd happened to run into each other.

"What the hell is that?"

Those were the first words out of my mouth. I wasn't paying attention to the expression on my face, but Matsuura looked frightened of me.

"What the hell does 'what the hell is that' mean?" Takuya parroted back at me.

"You..." My voice was shaking a little. I started to say *What about Sayuri?* but choked the words back down. I couldn't let Matsuura hear that.

"We did what we could, but it's over." Takuya avoided saying her name, too. "We've hit a dead end, and you know it. We can't just keep obsessing about it forever."

"What about the Velaciela?"

"That's..." Takuya's voice weakened, but almost imperceptibly. "It's... Count me out. I'm not up for it anymore. You do the rest on your own."

"Are you serious? Quit... Quit saying you're going to quit. We said we'd go over there together."

"Look, I'm tired." He really did sound tired. To be honest, I was feeling it, too. "Maybe this is how it was always going to end. It might be the perfect time to call it quits."

"Hey!" I yelled. "What's with the act?! Are you just giving up because it's hard?!"

"So what if I am?"

“Since when do you quit? You know that’s not how you do things. That’s not who you are! Knock it off.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” he said. This was a total cliché, like a crappy TV show but worse. “Talking to you makes me sick. Don’t ride in our car, all right?”

With that, he prompted Matsuura, and they went over to where the next train car would stop, putting some distance between us. My blood was boiling, and I watched them go in a kind of daze. Matsuura turned back to look at me anxiously a few times, but Takuya pointedly didn’t.

Before long, the train came and I got on, but the idea that he was in the next car over ticked me off, and I started unconsciously jiggling my knee. That wasn’t even a habit of mine.

I felt so rotten that I couldn’t stomach going to the abandoned station, and I went straight home that day.

The next day, I put my head back on straight and went to the abandoned station. I think I did it partly to get back at Takuya. After all, I’d done everything by myself before. If he wasn’t going to hang out with me anymore, so what? I’d just get the job done on my own. I’d show him.

I’d been so confident on the way there, but I wasn’t ready for the way all the sounds in the empty hangar were mine.

I pulled myself together and broke out my tools. Still, the absence of the usual distant clicking of Takuya’s beloved computer keyboard or the scratchy noise of the hard disc hurt more than I’d expected.

It was all so pointless.

The energy went out of me, and the tool I’d been holding slipped from my hand.

What am I doing?

What was the point of putting in all this time and effort? I didn’t have friends who’d rejoice in the success with me. She wasn’t there to shower me with praise: *Wow, that’s amazing!*

Listlessly, one step at a time, I got down off the aluminum ladder, then crouched on the ground. *Everything that happens now is just going to be me*, I thought. Finishing it. The takeoff and the landing.

And it would be so *boring*.

Little by little, like squeezing out a rag, my spirit drained away until I didn't have any strength left.

This is because you disappeared, Sayuri, I muttered silently. *You were too much a part of this. We invested too much in you. If you go and vanish on us, we can't move.*

It was all wrong now.

I couldn't make this anymore.

The power that had set us in motion, that had pushed us forward, forward, forward—was gone now. I took off the tool holder I'd been wearing and threw it to the ground.

Count me out.

That was what Takuya had said. He was always quick to decide. *You're right. I'm done, too. It doesn't matter now.*

I left the hangar and pushed the big double doors shut. I tied them in place with the chain we used as a lock, then hooked three padlocks through it, sealing it completely.

I went in through the back door and picked up my bag. My footsteps seemed louder than usual. For some reason, I felt anxious and impatient.

I went over to the switchboard and flipped the breaker. There was a muffled *clack*, and all the lights died. In the dead space, the Velaciela looked fake, like a model skeleton at a museum.

I left through the back door and locked it, then buried the bundle of keys in the dirt. Then I started trudging toward the path down the mountain. My bag was heavy. It had never been heavy before. *Hey, you're headed downhill*, I reminded myself. *What's wrong with you?*

I was right at the edge of the woods. When I looked back, the distant hangar

with its chained-up doors looked very shabby.

Far beyond it, I could see the tower. It was as straight and beautiful as ever. Just as I always did, I could almost hear it calling to me. I started to turn away, but I could feel its reproach. The tower drew me, tried to call me to it, as much as ever. A wave of self-pity swept over me, bringing tears to my eyes; furious and disgusted with myself, I gritted my teeth.

Don't call me.

Don't tempt me.

Don't put me under your spell...please...

I tried walking with purpose, my footsteps firm and solid, but that strength promptly left me. I looked down as I forged ahead.

Behind me, I felt like the tower was hanging over me, following the curve of the sky and covering me with guilt. I was trying to erase the past—my own desperation, the way I'd soothed the thirst I'd constantly felt for years, how urgent the word *promise* had sounded from her. I was so ashamed.

Don't look at me.

I murmured the words to the tower's aura. I wanted to go somewhere I couldn't see it.

I'd never thought such a thing before, of course. The idea had simply occurred to me, a whim, but before long, it was infinite inside me.

I didn't want to look at the tower anymore. I couldn't stand being there. I didn't want to go near any of it anymore—the abandoned remains of our poor half-built airplane or Sayuri's presence, which I remembered for no apparent reason every now and then.

I want to go somewhere.

I remembered Sayuri had said something similar. *Was that it? Is that why she actually disappeared?*

The idea of going far away suddenly began to feel real and imminent.

I went home and mulled it over thoroughly. Spring next year would be key. I

couldn't let that slip by me. I enthusiastically pored over entrance exam guidebooks and exam information websites. I learned that a certain distinguished private high school in Tokyo was famous for letting students test in, and they had a system of preferential treatment for students who came to the city from other prefectures. The entrance exam was tough, but if I really hit the books, I could probably make it work.

I spent several days talking my parents around. I wanted to go to a good university in Tokyo, I explained, but then I'd have to commute two hours each way to the cram school in Aomori City every day. Instead, it would be more efficient for me to go to a prep school in Tokyo that had a solid system for exam preparation. I pled my case, and finally I got permission to attend.

After that, in order to make up for the work I'd missed, I began studying like my life depended on it. It was boring work, all of it cramming, but I was decent at setting goals, making road maps, and plugging away toward them. While I was glued to my desk, drawing additional lines on graphed functions or reciting the practical uses of auxiliary verbs, I conveniently didn't have to remember Sayuri or the tower.

Sometimes I passed Takuya in the halls at school, but we both felt awkward and guilty around each other. By that point, we didn't even say hello. In the words of adolescent society, we were "over." Up until just a little while ago, we'd been inseparable every day, which made this change a drastic one. My chest did ache at the thought, but I had lots of new things to do, and I wanted to avoid triggering any more gut-wrenching emotional pain.

While all this was going on, the second term ended, winter vacation began, and the third term, which was completely focused on exam-taking, was over before I knew it.

I just barely managed to qualify for the school I'd been trying for.

I didn't happen to overhear what Takuya had opted to do next, and I didn't bother asking.

Because the closeness Takuya and I once shared had been broken, I did resent Sayuri just a little bit... But I'll acknowledge that's a selfish way to put it.

I resented her, but there was nothing I could do about it. We were past

mending at this point, and I was fully aware that it wasn't really Sayuri's fault at all. So I decided to take the rational view—that these things just happen and there's nothing you can do about it.

Considering how it turned out, though, the rational approach was not the one for this. Much later on, I would know it.

I'd liked Sayuri. I'd also liked Takuya. Losing both of them had broken something inside me, something that would never be repaired.

I tried to forget them, but I just couldn't seem to do it. It hurts when the memory won't let go.

Some things you forget whether you want to or not, some things you can't forget even if you want to, and some things you absolutely can't afford to forget.

It was a lesson I'd never wanted to learn, but I never had a choice.

SLEEP

1

In spring of the year I turned sixteen, I set foot in Tokyo for the first time.

When I got off the Tohoku Shinkansen and went through the ticket gate, the sheer size of the crowd made me draw back in shock. Tokyo Station was enormous, and it was windowless, like a subterranean city. If it hadn't been for all the signs, I'm sure I wouldn't even have managed to get out of the building.

I found the Marunouchi subway line and boarded it. I hardly even had to wait for the train to arrive when I got to the platform. In this world, a train arrived every five minutes. Time didn't move the same here—not the way it did back where I used to belong.

This was exactly what I'd been looking for when I came to Tokyo.

I remembered that morning, when I'd left the house in Minmaya. My mom had said she wanted to go with me to Tokyo, to see me off, or even just as far as Aomori or Hachinohe, but I wouldn't have it. I wanted to find a new self in a new place, and I desperately wanted to avoid arriving there with the dust of my hometown clinging to me.

I got off at Nishi-Shinjuku. When I climbed the stairs and stepped out onto the broad avenue, right in front of me, a skyscraper topped with something like a plate at the top soared up into the sky. *That's huge*, I thought, stating the obvious.

I turned right at the Naruko Tenjin Shrine intersection, then walked for about five minutes, studying the map. When I happened to look up, I was surrounded by skyscrapers as large as that earlier one.

What a magnificent view.

It's a whole forest of towers, I thought.

This district was full of them, too. The cluster of high-rises in Shinjuku's new downtown area watched me from above, unmoved, but they didn't afflict me with that sense of urgency. It was a huge relief.

From there, I walked about ten minutes, and then the cityscape changed. The skyscrapers vertically eroding space suddenly thinned and vanished, and old residential streets began crawling out over the ground.

That shift in scenery was truly novel. The force drawing my mind upward was now pulling it out horizontally. Because those streets were on lower ground, when I stood at the top of the slope, I could look out over all of them. The difference in the landscape was stark.

When I gazed across it, the old residential district really was...well, old. It seemed as if the townscape from the fifties had been preserved just as it was. Almost all of the houses had tile roofs—an impressive sight for a boy who'd grown up in snow country; I wasn't used to seeing tiles. The town had a genuine human feel to it. Tokyo's neighborhoods weren't all like Shibuya and Harajuku and Ginza.

I slowly descended the curving stone steps that led into that district. The dorm I'd be living in for the next three years was somewhere around here.

After getting a little lost, I found the dilapidated social welfare agency dorm.

It may have been a dorm, but it wasn't the old-fashioned kind that forced you to live communally. The living quarters were more like wooden one-room apartments with kitchens. It was a two-story building, and the room I'd be living in was on the second floor. My dad had found it for me through a work connection.

When I actually got a good look at it, it was obviously in the "built forty years ago" bracket. It didn't have a bath, and the washroom was shared. At least the rent was extra cheap. *Well, this works just fine for me*, I thought. I had no complaints. I hadn't come here to enjoy living in luxury on my own. As long as I had a place to sleep, I didn't care about anything else.

The cardboard boxes I'd shipped over formed a haphazard pile in the middle of the floor. I detoured around them, cut across the room, and opened the window to air the place out. An aluminum sash would've been too convenient

for this place; the frame was wooden, and whenever you pulled on it, the glass panes rattled something awful.

It was a beautiful day, the way the sunlight lanced into the gloomy room through the window.

I left the window open and went out for a rambling walk. For starters, I thought I'd learn my way around the immediate neighborhood and get ready for my new life.

When I looked around just outside the shared entryway, the dorm was flanked by a coin laundry and a public bath. When I walked a few steps, I came out on a broad avenue almost immediately, and there were convenience stores and all sorts of restaurants. Two of them were from the same chain and facing each other across the road, but even so.

From what I'd seen, I'd be well taken care of. The place seemed to have pretty much everything.

This was Tokyo, after all, and I'd imagined a noisy neighborhood full of cars and people, but it was much quieter than I'd expected. There was a pleasant street lined with trees that was the wrong width for cars—it almost looked like a park.

I walked down that street and came out onto a different one. Then I took left turns and right turns, keeping sure not to get lost. Before long, I came out on Ome-Kaido Avenue. When I walked toward its west side, there was an area surrounded by a metal fence beside the road, and it looked like there was a new building under construction.

It reminded me of the vacant lot that had been Sayuri's house, but only for a moment. *Replacing houses and buildings is an everyday thing in Tokyo*, I thought, and calmed down. In a way, it was better to have a life so hectic that I didn't have time to reminisce.

For no particular reason, I looked at the sky.

And then—

I was aghast.

In the sky to the north—faintly, above the houses—I thought I'd seen a line rising straight up, like a mechanical pencil lead.

I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them again.

Sweat broke out all over my body.

It was definitely there.

The tower.

It was small compared to the view in Aomori, tiny and hazy, but there was no mistaking it. It was the tower that stood in Ezo.

It couldn't be true. I couldn't possibly be able to see it.

I remembered the distance from Aomori to central Hokkaido, visualized the size of the tower we could see from Aomori, then worked out a mental estimate of its diameter, then assumed the actual diameter was double that value, give or take. There was still no way it should be visible in Tokyo. On paper, that was definitely true.

Still, I could just barely see it...

I stopped an elderly passerby who seemed like a local; I told him I'd just moved in and asked if it was always possible to see that tower from here. The man told me his eyes were bad and it was pretty hard for him to make it out, but he'd heard that you could see it on days when the weather was clear. Like Mount Fuji.

That was completely ridiculous.

Even after the old man had gone on his way, I just stood there blankly. This was awful. I'd moved all the way down here so I wouldn't see that thing, and yet...

I staggered. With a light metallic crash, my back connected with a chain-link fence.

We had an entrance ceremony, and then the new term began.

I'd braced myself for the discomfort of being alone in a distant high school, but it wasn't actually that bad. Most of the students were from Tokyo, but there

were some from all different areas of Japan, and the school culture was accepting of them. Even though I wasn't from the city, I hardly ever felt as if I didn't belong.

Still, even if we out-of-towners weren't rare, we were still passably unusual. People were curious about me, and they'd get jealous of the fact that I was living on my own. For a while, I made a joke out of my completely unenviable, run-down residence to make people laugh.

People had always been comfortable around me (and I didn't realize how valuable that natural gift was until after I'd lost it), and it wasn't that hard for me to get along well with others. I made several friends that I could hang out with almost immediately. Living on my own didn't make me particularly lonely, either. Not that I was consciously aware of, at least.

The school was smack in the middle of a cluster of magnificent condominium buildings in Nishi-Shinjuku. Even though it was in the heart of the city, it had an athletic field that was actual dirt, not asphalt.

From the windows of my third-floor classroom, I had a good view of the high-rises in the new downtown.

After I saw the tower, the buildings in Nishi-Shinjuku seemed to be its kin. Looking at those tall, proud buildings, I was restless. I wondered why people built them. Why did they have to be so big?

What on earth went on inside those buildings?

Every so often, I wondered about it. It wasn't that I wanted to go inside, per se, but for some reason, I felt as if I was being unfairly excluded.

In high school, I was very dedicated to my studies.

After all, I'd come to the city for my university entrance exams, supposedly. I had to be dedicated. The thought that I was home free now that I was in Tokyo had crossed my mind, but I got the feeling I should at least study. Besides, there wasn't really anything else I wanted to do.

That being the case, I did prep work and review in amounts that would have been unthinkable in the context of my time in middle school. The work was absolutely no fun at all, but it was a way to kill time without letting my mind

wander to depressing things. This was a serious escalator school, so literally no one around me thought I was a loser for studying. That was what you were supposed to be doing here, and it was held in high esteem. I managed to secure a moderately good position for myself in this new environment. My classmates mostly showed me a certain amount of respect, and I had a reputation for making friends easily. I didn't hit it off with everybody, but not to the point where it was a problem. No matter where I went, there was a place for me, more or less. Objectively speaking, I was really lucky. Blessed, even.

For some reason, though...I couldn't get rid of that vague, uneasy feeling that this place wasn't right for me.

I didn't want to have a phone at the dorm if I could help it, but my parents didn't let me get away with that. My dad had an unused phone subscription voucher, and we ended up using it to get a phone installed in my room.

Right in the middle of midterms during my first term at school, there was a small earthquake in the Kanto region. It was so tiny that I had no clue it had even happened, but my worrywart mother called me. I just asked her when we'd had this earthquake, and she was scandalized.

Two days later, I got an envelope of cash from her. There was a note inside telling me to buy a TV so that I'd have access to disaster information.

I stuck the cash into my pocket, envelope and all, and headed over to Yodobashi Camera. When I went to the TV section, the floor was buried in TVs of all types and sizes. I'd always thought it was weird, but the programs you see in home appliance sections always look utterly ridiculous. It's probably because there are long rows of the same image, all coming at you. It killed any desire I had to buy a television. I didn't want to watch TV that much anyway.

I figured I'd grab something to eat somewhere and go home, and as I was cutting across the floor, my eyes landed on a certain object.

It made me think of a huge fish skeleton, but on closer inspection, it turned out to be a violin that was nothing but a frame.

A Kawai silent violin. The acoustic structures had been completely eliminated, and it made almost no sound. If you plugged in headphones, the person playing it could hear what it sounded like, but that was all. It was a practice violin,

designed to not make noise.

On impulse, I bought it. The purchase added quite a few points to my point card, so I used those and bought a pocket radio as well.

I asked an employee if there was a store in the area that had a good selection of learner's books for musical instruments. The employee very kindly told me, so I went to that store and bought several violin textbooks.

I began practicing that day. I worked through the exercises as the textbook said to, starting from the very beginning. One by one, I taught myself how to play the practice melodies in it.

When you're pushing yourself hard in school, it's nice to play an instrument as a change of pace. After a few months, even though I wasn't good, I'd managed to pick up enough technique that I could play fairly decently for an amateur. The next thing I knew, I caught myself trying to remember the melody that Sayuri had played that summer day.

I plumbed my tenuous memory of it and felt my way along, rediscovering the notes one by one. Every time I did, I saw Sayuri's closed eyes, the slightly awkward movement of her bow, and the way her hair had swung, and I felt a weight on my chest.

Naturally, I couldn't remember the piece completely.

Fortunately, I did remember the name of the song: "A Distant Calling Voice." I went to a big library that was famous for its extensive collection of sheet music, hunted up the score for that piece, and made a copy.

And so the days went by. I woke up early in the morning, went to school, passed the time relatively comfortably, studied at the library, went shopping, and returned to the dorm. Then I did the whole thing again. From time to time—only once in a while, really—a clammy, heavy, leaden fatigue would settle over me when I got back to my room and closed the door.

At times like that, I played Sayuri's melody.

And close to a year went by.

I'd gotten pretty close to several of my classmates. They were all nice people.

They'd been brought up well, and they also really knew how to have fun. Most of them had grown up in the city, and they took me all over. Sometimes they brought me to classic entertainment districts like Shibuya and Harajuku and Odaiba, and other times they'd choose Kichijouji or Shimokitazawa. Most of the time, we went to places in the area around Shinjuku. Every so often, we'd go to clubs at night and drink liquor. I don't know what it's like now, but club culture was still functioning back then, and there were places that would pretend not to see high schoolers as long as we weren't wearing our school uniforms.

Those times were great. I had my friends and a place where I belonged. It felt good to enjoy ourselves together so openly.

And yet sometimes all the things I saw and heard and experienced that way seemed to be made-up. I'd think, *Where the hell am I?* It was the tension and bewilderment I would have felt standing all by myself on a small stage, where absolutely everything was fake. Sometimes I thought if I closed my eyes, they'd whisk away the backdrop and everything around me would vanish.

One day, on the way home at dusk, I looked up at the cluster of buildings in Shinjuku.

They seemed completely unreal.

Softly, I closed my eyes and imagined the painted backdrop being whisked away in the blink of an eye.

But nothing happened. This was reality. Even if it did look like a mirage hovering beyond the ocean. The things I was seeing truly existed on the same ground I was standing on.

You're the illusion here, a skyscraper told me.

No, it didn't; I just imagined it.

You're a ghost, another building said. *You're insubstantial*.

Maybe so.

As I walked unsteadily along, my mind was telling me I'd become a pallid ghost that was wandering the streets. Was it me that was unreal and not the town? It must be.

Looking up at all those tall buildings touching the sky, I wondered what sort of people were in there and what they were doing.

After all, it's not as if you can come in here. You'll never be a part of it.

That enormous thought bore down on me from overhead, crushing me.

I was being shunned.

I wasn't part of this city.

My own voice harassed me, bouncing wildly off my internal walls.

Still, I had no choice but to live here. I had to find a way to integrate. No matter what it took.

A year passed, and I moved up to the next grade. I didn't go back home, not even for the Bon festival or for New Year's.

2

One day, I got lost.

It was the day the first-term midterms ended, when we were well into spring. I'd never had a particularly bad sense of direction, but I'd been constantly losing my way ever since I got to Tokyo. I'd get lost in Shinjuku Station, which seemed to have grown organically instead of being planned, but I'd also get lost in the grid of Ikebukuro Station.

I was headed out for a party-night-slash-midterm-wrap event a few friends had invited me to, and the world was already getting darker. We'd planned to go home and change clothes first, then meet up at our destination. Unless I really and truly couldn't make it, it was my policy to never turn down an invitation.

I had to accept them. I had to get used to the city and its people, to become a part of it myself. Even when I didn't feel like it, I'd go along with the rest of them, and I was careful never to let them think I was bored.

We were going to a small rock club in a semibasement in Nishi-Shinjuku; it was on the edge of a residential district, a short distance away from the

downtown area. I'd been there a few times already. It was noisy and cramped and the perfect place to get loud and blow off steam.

That day, though, I couldn't find it. I wandered all over, turning the corners I was supposed to turn and taking the alleys I was supposed to take, but I couldn't find the place. I didn't have a cell phone, so I had no way to get ahold of the friends I was supposed to be meeting.

I know it was around here... As I was shuttling between the places it should have been, over and over, a girl about my age who'd come walking up behind me called to me.

"What are you doing?"

I flinched. My first thought was that she might have been suspicious of my random wandering, but fortunately, that wasn't the case.

The girl's expression was very friendly. She had on skinny jeans and a top made of a thin fabric that left her shoulders bare, and she stood with most of her weight shifted onto one hip.

Trying not to let my confusion show, I told her, "Uh...I got lost."

"Where are you trying to go?"

"Um..."

Still unsure what was going on, I groped for the name of the club, found it, and told it to her. Whenever I end up in a strange situation (and being addressed by an unknown girl for no reason was about as strange as it ever got for me), it's all I can do to keep up with what's happening. If you ask me a question, I will sound stupid when I answer.

"Ohhh, I know that place. If that's where you're going, you're off by two streets," the girl said. "Leave this street and turn onto the second one. It's right there."

"Thank..."

I was about to say "Thank you," but the girl wasn't finished.

"No sense of direction, huh?"

“Guess so.”

I thought she was acting too familiar with me, but I did answer. I wanted to tell her my sense of direction wasn't *that* terrible, but the statement wouldn't have been very convincing right after I'd gotten lost.

“I'm surprised, though. I didn't know you liked hanging out there, Fujisawa.”

I looked at her closely.

How did she know my name?

I didn't recognize her face. Actually, I didn't interact with girls all that much in the first place. She picked up on my bewilderment, and she told me before I could ask.

“I know you. I mean, we ended up in the same class this year, you know.”

“Huh...?”

“You don't recognize me at all?”

“Um...”

She took her hair, which came to just below her shoulders, and bunched it into pigtails. “I usually wear my hair like this.”

“Ohhh.”

Finally, I remembered. I did seem to recall a girl like her. “Sorry, I remember now.”

“Oh, good. I would've really weirded you out if you didn't.”

“Sorry.” After I said it, I wondered why I was apologizing. “You're not in your uniform, though, and your hair is different.”

“You're right.” She nodded, but she wasn't done. “But that wasn't the real reason, was it, Fujisawa? I bet you're the type who can't put names to faces for the girls in your class, even at the very end of the school year.”

She'd called it in one, but I didn't want to admit that. Instead, I grunted back at her. She could take that as a yes or no, whichever she preferred.

“To tell you the truth, I've been wanting to talk to you for a while now.”

“Why?” I was genuinely curious. Frankly speaking, there’s nothing about me to attract interest from girls.

“I just did,” she said. “But you’re always spacing out, and I don’t want to interrupt. And then I end up missing the chance to talk to you at school.”

“Um, really?”

“Yes, really. You haven’t noticed? You space out and stare at nothing sometimes. What do you see?”

“Oh, no, I’m not looking at anything. My eyes aren’t even focused.”

“What are you thinking about, then?”

“Nothing much. My mind’s just blank.”

“That’s weird. You should quit if you can. You don’t even look alive.”

“Uh, listen...”

Inwardly, I was perplexed. What exactly was this girl trying to do, and how? More important, I had friends waiting for me. I knew where the place was now, and I had to get going.

“Say, do you really, *really* want to go there?” she asked me.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just the usual post-midterm party, right? Can’t you skip, Fujisawa?”

“What would I do instead?”

“Go somewhere else with me. Somewhere that isn’t all smoky.”

Well, this got very weird, I thought.

A girl I’d barely even met before had flagged me down on the street, then practically dragged me into a café, where we were now sitting across from each other... Frankly speaking, I had no confidence in myself, so I had no assumptions about the implications of this. To be specific, I didn’t think she liked me or anything.

Awkwardly, though, I couldn’t remember her name. Somehow, it seemed a little late to ask at this point. As we’d walked down the street, I’d tried

desperately to recall it. The key to remembering names you've forgotten are the consonants and its visual image. The image was...cool colors? As for the sounds... Mentally, I went through the Japanese alphabet in order.

She'd taken me to a stylish café on the second floor of a building that faced a wide avenue. One side of the café was glass-walled, so you could look out over the street and down at the passersby. We chose a table by the window.

When the waiter came to take our orders, I finally remembered her name. We ordered coffee and black tea, and after the server had gone, I ventured:

"Um, you're Mizuno, right?" Written with the characters for *water* and *field*.

"Well done." She rested her elbows on the table and smiled. "And? What's my first name?"

Seeing that I was stumped, she laughed a hearty laugh.

"It's Rika."

"Rika?"

"Yup. I'm Rika. Don't forget it this time."

"Okay, all right. I don't think I can at this point."

"Good."

Rika Mizuno nodded, looking satisfied.

I was finally able to sit down and think through what was happening. I'd learned her name. What I still didn't know was what she was after.

"What were you doing, Mizuno? You're not in your uniform; weren't you in the area for a reason?"

"Mm, well, yes."

Rika glanced out the window, then let her eyes return to me. "I was meeting a friend, but they bailed on me at the last minute. I didn't wanna just go back home after all the trouble of getting changed and putting makeup on, you know?"

"And then you just happened to see me, and you figured no time like the present."

“Pretty much.” Rika nodded; she didn’t look the least bit apologetic. “I was walking along all upset, and then there you were, wandering around and spacing out. I thought you might trip and fall if I left you alone, so I flagged you down.”

That was unflattering, but she said it so nonchalantly that I couldn’t exactly protest. Apparently, *spacey* was the word she was using as a sort of mental shorthand for me.

“Do I really space out that much?”

“Yes. You do. You were doing it just a minute ago, too,” Rika declared. “You’re like that a lot, aren’t you, Fujisawa? You’re spacey, or dazed, or just not there at all. Sometimes you look like you’re wondering why you’re even here. It’s like... it’s like you’re thinking you’re not where you’re supposed to be.”

She’d really hit the nail on the head, and I went quiet. I’d thought I was hiding it so well, too.

Apparently, I didn’t hide my opinion of her analysis very well, either.

“Oh, are you upset? I’m sorry. I’m good at catching those little things, you see,” Rika explained. She seemed to be a decent, uncomplicated girl.

She asked me all sorts of questions about myself.

“So what kind of guy are you, Fujisawa?”

“That’s a hard question to answer.”

“Where do you live, then?”

“In Shinjuku Ward. About a fifteen minute walk from the school.”

“Wow, lucky! Did you choose the school because it was close to you?”

“No, no. I’m living in a dorm.”

When I told her I came from Aomori on my own, she was really taken aback.

“Why did you come over here for school?”

“Because I got sick of shoveling snow.” I grinned, but Rika didn’t buy it. So then I gave the explanation I’d given over and over during the past year. I’d save time by coming to Tokyo and attending a full-fledged exam prep school instead

of commuting to a cram school on a series of local trains back at home, and the costs weren't much different, either, et cetera.

"Hmm."

"And I guess I also wanted to go someplace totally new."

"Oh, I completely get that."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm from Tokyo and so are my parents," Rika said, pointing to herself. "We don't have relatives anywhere else, either. Tokyo is seriously all I know. I dream of getting out of here, seriously."

"Where in Tokyo?"

"Us? We're in Zoushigaya. What's Aomori like?"

"It's snow country. Famous for apples and sea urchin and squid and the Nebuta festival and Osamu Dazai."

"Geez, what are you, a tour guide? What I want to know is more, you know, about everyday life and how it feels there."

"Okay, but there's really not much I can tell you." To be honest, I didn't really want to think about home.

"Am I being too nosy?"

"No." I shook my head. "Honestly, I wish I had more interesting stories to share. Not that I mind the interview from a girl."

"Hey, uh, apropos of nothing...don't get the wrong idea, okay? I mean, um, basically, I'm not interested in you that way..." Rika's expression turned serious, and she sat up straighter. "I'm already dating someone."

"I figured you were," I said.

Rika seemed a little put out by that. As for why, I couldn't tell you.

"Why did you figure?"

There was really no "why." One of the things I'd instinctively come to understand over the past couple of years was that if you saw a girl and noticed

she was good-looking, it was generally safe to assume that she already had somebody.

“I can just tell. What’s your boyfriend like? Does he go to our school?”

“Yeah.” She gave a tiny nod. “We were in the same class in year one. We ended up in different classes this year, though.”

I recognized the name she gave. He was pretty tall and really handsome. I was fairly sure I’d talked to him once or twice for something or other. I thought back. He’d seemed decent enough. I didn’t really know, but he was probably all right.

“What brought you together? Did one of you tell the other you liked them?” I asked her.

“More like we just ended up together. I thought it might be nice to leave things ambiguous, but I changed my mind and suggested it myself.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Have you *seen* him?” she answered instantly, and I laughed in spite of myself. From anyone else, it would sound like sarcasm, but she had a knack for delivering it in a way that her listener wouldn’t mind.

That was a perfectly fine approach, I thought, liking a guy because he’s handsome. It was simple and easy to understand, and a solid standard. Only problem was, I didn’t belong anywhere near the “handsome” category...

“Then guys like me probably aren’t your type,” I ventured.

“Nope. You don’t do it for me at all.”

Rika Mizuno told it like it was, smiling all the while. Disappointing, of course, but not upsetting.

“But I wouldn’t expect you to get any ideas anyway. I don’t have to worry about that with you. Speaking of, it never hurts to ask, so here goes: Is it okay if I invite you to go places for fun with me sometimes?”

I was pretty confused. “Why?” I asked immediately. I had no idea why she’d ask me that right after telling me she had a boyfriend.

“Kinda boring if the only boy you have to talk to is your boyfriend, don’t you think? We can just hang out for a little while on days like today, when my friends end up flaking out on me. Better than staring into space, right?”

That was quite a way to think, but, well, I couldn’t say I didn’t understand.

In that sense, Rika must have had pretty good judgment to find me. She’d seen me and thought, *I won’t have to worry around that guy*. She wasn’t far off the mark, either. Frankly, I didn’t really have much of a desire to date girls, unusual as that is for a teenage guy...

“Sure,” I said. “As long as neither of us gets any weird ideas.”

“Right. No weird ideas,” she said.

When we split up outside the café, and she’d set off toward the station, I replayed the rambling conversation in my mind.

She was strange, I thought, and I meant it. The way she thought, the way she felt, the way she talked—nothing about her was conventional.

I hadn’t always even been able to follow what she was saying. To each their own, though, and for me, meeting her had been a small change in my boring life spacing out. In short, it had been rather novel and interesting.

That night, I dreamed about Sayuri.

*

In the dream, Sayuri was in a strange, mysterious place. The sky was dull as an old photograph. I’d seen a sky that color before, but I couldn’t remember where.

Below it, there were many twisted towers, literally innumerable. Their shapes were nothing like the modern design of the Union’s tower. These were more primitive, ethnic, organic.

They were a warm color that reminded me of unglazed pottery, shaped like conch shells that had been stretched out like candy until they were as long as spears.

Their tops had been cut off sharply on a diagonal, like the tips of bamboo spears, to expose the interiors. Since there were no roofs, those places were

like observation platforms that looked out over the sky.

All you could see from those platforms was the sky. Both up and down. Sky both above and below. There was no land in this place.

And that was where Sayuri was.

She looked just a little older than she had when I'd known her. Probably a year or two.

She was hugging her knees, looking down. She was insubstantial, and I could see through her, like a ghost. She was sobbing. Her shoulders trembled every so often, but other than that, she didn't move. She only wept.

I heard the wind, and I heard her cries.

The two sounds formed a harmonic chord that echoed mournfully across the endless sky.

*

When I opened my eyes, a hopeless feeling nearly overwhelmed me. As if some buglike thing was squirming around in my chest. Why wasn't Sayuri there with me? Why had she disappeared? Something was wrong. Something was proceeding down the wrong path. Something was off, as if I'd wandered into some other world.

Why had Sayuri been somewhere so desolate? I couldn't sense any life in that place.

The idea that Sayuri might already be dead and gone from this world flashed through my mind like lightning, and my vision went black. Over the past year and a half, the possibility had never crossed my mind.

Or maybe I'd subconsciously held it at bay.

I went to school, and as I set my bag on my desk, someone thumped me on the back. I turned around to find Rika Mizuno. She looked me in the eye and smiled in a meaningful way, but apparently she wasn't planning to talk; she slipped away, over to where the girls were gathered.

Following her briefly with my eyes, I thought for just a moment how great it would be if she were Sayuri. Then I realized how wrong that was, how rude,

how twisted, and I hated myself for it.

3

The next week, on Saturday, I was walking down the hall at school when Rika called to me. Officially, the school was closed two days a week, but there were exam prep drills on Saturday morning, and there was a tacit understanding that all students would attend them. That was over, and I was just on my way back to the dorm. Rika asked me if I had any plans after this.

“Not really. Going home, getting something to eat. I’ll think about what to do later after that.”

“You have no plans on a Saturday? Why? Who doesn’t have plans on a Saturday in this day and age?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, of course not. It’s not my business.”

“So what are your plans?”

“If you’re free, do you want to come get lunch with me? And then hang out with me for a bit afterward?”

“Sure,” I said. “After all, I’m an anomaly in this day and age.”

Rika and I left the school and walked to Shinjuku Station.

“So where are we going?” I asked her.

“Let’s take the Yamanote Line to Ikebukuro.”

She and I got off at Ikebukuro Station, and she took me to a bento shop that had dine-in seating. The place was known for its use of organic ingredients; you picked three side dishes, and they brought them to your table with rice and miso soup and pickled vegetables. It tasted better than I’d expected, and it was pretty cheap.

“This place is great. If there was one in Shinjuku, I’d go every day.”

“I know, right? If you go to Nakano, they’ve got another location there, but it’s a little far to stop by on the way home from school.”

“So what next?”

“Right.” Rika looked at her watch. “Let’s kill another twenty minutes or so. Then we’ll go see a show.”

“A show?”

“Right. A play, to be specific. Do you see plays a lot?”

“No... I’ve never gone to one of my own accord.”

“When was the last time you saw one?”

“Um...” I thought hard. “When I was in grade school, I took a trip to Osaka with my grandpa, and we went to see Shinkigeki. I think that was it.”

“You have a grandpa?” Rika asked. “Lucky...”

“Maybe. Why a play, though?”

“I like small theaters. Amateur plays and things like that. I don’t have anybody who’ll go with me, though. If I take them once, they turn me down when I ask again. They never tell me why, but I guess they get bored.”

“I see...”

“It’s a theater group with about five members, run by a friend of mine. I like it a lot, but it’s kind of unique, and people either love it or hate it. You’re weird, Fujisawa, so you may actually end up liking it.”

“I’m not weird, though,” I objected for no particular reason. “I’m as normal as they come. Nobody’s ever even told me I was weird before.”

“Hmm, well, if you want to keep thinking that,” Rika said dismissively. “Anyway, let’s hang out a little longer.”

I’d never been to a small theater before, and the place was indeed small. It was a rented space on the third floor of a mixed-use building, which it had apparently remodeled by force.

Rika and I got there about ten minutes before the play would start. When we climbed the narrow staircase and stepped into the venue, the audience seating turned out to be rows of wooden crates, topped with thin seating cushions like the sort you’d buy at a hundred-yen shop.

A packed house here would have been fifty people, and only half the seats were actually taken. The audience seemed to be mostly college students and people in the same line of business: individuals in casual clothes who were involved in theater themselves. The only ones in high school uniforms were Rika and me and two other girls.

The only theaters I'd ever known were ones that had been built with real seating, like in a movie theater, and the idea that this cheap theater existed and actually attracted audiences struck me as pretty novel.

Before long, a cheap-sounding buzzer went off twice, and the house lights abruptly dimmed and went out. We could hear the clattering of work being done onstage, and finally, the lights slowly came up.

The set resembled a studio apartment with minimal furnishings. The sound effect of a steel door opening played, and a young woman appeared onstage. Wearily, she took off her coat, spoke to her cat, petted him, and fed him... except there was no cat onstage. But the story progressed as if there was a cat present.

The woman was an office worker who lived by herself, and she was exhausted by the usual problems for women. She talked to the cat about this and that, and the conversation was used to develop a variety of background stories.

The invisible cat had no lines, but he was kind to the woman, and he loved her. The woman acted in ways that showed this clearly. From time to time, he would run away to be with his feline girlfriend, or get into accidents so he couldn't come home, and every time it happened, the woman would be upset. But the cat ultimately got her on her feet again, and she had a better outlook for the future.

"That was a lot better than I thought it would be," I said to Rika, after the play had ended and we were lined up in the modest crowd that was making for the exit.

"It wasn't too cramped for you?"

"It was," I told her honestly. "But the play itself was good. I liked the way the whole thing felt handmade. Like the props. You think the actors made everything themselves?"

“Probably. None of them have money. I think they use stuff they already have.”

“I like it.”

“What about the story?”

“The plot was a little hard to follow with all the time jumps, but it was good.”

“They don’t have many actors, so they have to get creative. I heard that’s why it turned out like that.”

When we left the building, the actors were outside, greeting the audience members. A bespectacled man who’d played a supporting character spotted Rika and called to her. When I asked her later, I found out he was the leader of the troupe.

“Rika! Thanks for coming. How was it?”

“He says it was really good,” she said, pointing at me, “and he’s picky.”

“Hmm? He’s not the one who was with you last time. New boyfriend?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Well, maybe a little like that.” Rika’s tone made it clear that she was joking.

“You look good together, though. More than the earlier guy,” the leader said.

Then she and I started for the station.

As we walked, I thought of something. “Have you actually been in a play before, maybe?”

“Why?”

“Dunno, just seemed like you had.”

“Mm-hmm.” Rika nodded. “I was in an amateur theater group like that one from my third year of middle school until summer last year. I quit, though.”

“Why?”

“Stuff happened. The relationships between cast members can get intense—and that can make things complicated. Then the group broke up, and the members got absorbed into other little groups they were already on good terms

with. Me, I was just tired. I had offers, but I didn't go. I do show up at performances like this one today, though, because of my old connections."

"Hmm, I see," I said. I didn't understand all of it, but apparently plays made for deep relationships, which brought hardship with them. I could definitely sympathize with that.

We reached Ikebukuro Station. Rika said she was tired, so she was going to take the subway to Higashi-Ikebukuro. "Okay," I said, and when I started to head toward the Shinjuku-bound platform on the Yamanote Line, she grabbed my sleeve and told me to come see her off, at least to the ticket gate. I did, because I had to, and she used her card to get through the gate, then went up the stairs to the platform without so much as a backward glance. *I think she's the weird one here...*

She'd told me to come say good-bye, but then hadn't looked back or waved once. I had no idea what was going on in her head.

My own mood was decidedly so-so, and I boarded the train and headed back to my apartment in Nishi-Shinjuku.

After that, I went on several dates with Rika Mizuno, just a couple a month. I never used the word *date* myself; Rika would invite me to go places by saying "Let's go on a date."

Sometimes we just drank tea, and other times she'd take me around shopping with her from noon through the rest of the day. She was probably coming to me when her other friends couldn't make it; did that mean she was constantly going around like this with all kinds of people, to all kinds of fun places? How did she have so much energy?

When she asked me out, though, she always looked a little tired. Every so often, she'd go quiet all of a sudden, biting back a wave of fatigue as it worked its way up. She was probably buzzing around at random in an attempt to free herself from weariness. I liked that mindset, and I could sympathize. I kept her company as much as I could.

"I wonder if he'll get the wrong idea, though."

We were at a self-serve coffee stand when I asked her something that had

been on my mind.

“Who? About what?”

“You know: —.” I said the name of the classmate Rika was dating. “If we’re meeting on our days off like this.”

“What? You want to talk about that?”

“Not really. Can’t help wondering, though.”

“Well, I mean, if he knew, he probably wouldn’t be happy,” Rika said nonchalantly. “It doesn’t matter what he thinks, though. We’ll just let him be.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve decided to ignore him for a while.”

I didn’t know how far it was okay to pry, so I just agreed noncommittally.

Next, we chatted about this and that, but then she said, out of nowhere, “The thing is, he’s really into my body.”

At first, it seemed like a complete non sequitur, but I finally realized she was talking about her boyfriend.

“Well, of course he is,” I said.

“You think?”

“Yeah, that’s normal. You don’t think so?”

“I see..... Well, you may be right.” She paused, then said, “But I don’t want that.”

Taking great care not to project any implications, I ventured, “Do you mean you don’t like him all that much?”

Rika suddenly straightened up and looked at me squarely. “Don’t say things like that.”

I broke out in a cold sweat. “Sorry,” I muttered. “He seems like a good guy. That’s all I meant.”

“I know that.”

“Yeah.”

“I do like him, you know. But those are two different things. You can understand that, Fujisawa. He doesn’t.”

“Hmm.”

As I grunted inwardly, I sympathized with both of them. Some things just don’t go the way you want.

“I do understand the feeling, though...”

“Whose feelings?”

“His, of course.”

“Huh? Seriously?” She was surprised in the most annoying way possible. “So you’ve got sex on the brain, too, huh?”

“Wait, wait, what do you mean? What do you think I am?”

“Ew, don’t. You can’t.” Rika leaned forward as she spoke. “Don’t get into that stuff, Fujisawa. Don’t let your mind go there. I don’t want you to get trapped. It’s fine. Just do your thing and space out.”

“Now you’re talking crazy...”

What on earth did she think I was? Not that it mattered what she thought of me, but...

Maybe most guys would get mad or embarrassed in this situation, complain about not being treated like guys, but one thing I’ve got going for me is that I don’t sweat the little stuff.

Casually, I looked at Rika’s slim fingers, which were wrapped around her glass of iced tea, and suddenly, I remembered Sayuri. The last day I’d seen her, at the abandoned station, when she’d started to fall and I’d grabbed her hand.

Come to think of it, that had been about the only time I’d really touched Sayuri. I looked at my own hand. It had almost forgotten that sensation. Still, it had startled me—and thrilled me. I’d been surprised at myself, successfully grabbing her hand at the very last second, and also at the thinness of her wrist, the coolness of her temperature, the softness.

The feat had been nothing short of a miracle, if I did say so myself. Straight

out of a Hollywood movie. I was sure I'd never be able to do it again.

No... That was wrong.

Back then, in the summer of my third year of middle school, I'm sure I could have done that as often as I had to. Or at least I would have believed so. I'd been bursting with strength then, and I wondered where it had gone.

Right... I'd probably given it all to Sayuri on that summer day.

Was I trapped by the memory of when I'd tried to keep Sayuri here with all my might? Did I want to treasure it?

That was a dumb idea. Sayuri was gone, and I had no reason to hope I'd ever see her again.

Still, it was a while before I could look away from my palm. It was smooth and soft and uncalledoused.

4

The vestiges of summer evaporated without a trace, and autumn came.

On that day, Rika was more restless than usual, and she looked depressed.

She didn't appreciate it when others caught the finer points of her moods, so at first I pretended not to notice. However, as she drummed her fingers on the table and looked around for no reason, it did start to make me curious.

"What's the matter?"

We were in Ikebukuro at the time; we'd gone a little farther afield on our way home from school. I stopped in the middle of the street to ask, keeping my tone as gentle as I could.

"Mm."

She gave a nod that wasn't really an answer and left the question unaddressed. Guess she didn't want to tell me. Well, whatever. Everybody had things like that.

However, before long, she started sighing frequently. It was less like an expression of melancholy and more like how she needed to breathe, almost like

panting. Like she was desperately trying to put something to rest inside her. Her color wasn't good, either.

I leaned in to take a closer look at her.

"You're not feeling well, are you?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"You should go home. I'll take you back to your place."

"No." She shook her head slightly. "There's nobody at my house. I don't want to be alone today."

"Something happen?"

She gave a small nod. I think it was just because she didn't have the energy to deny it, not because she'd decided to be open with me.

At my urging, she leaned against the brick wall of a nearby pizza restaurant. I leaned against the same wall, waiting for her to calm down.

"My friend."

"Hmm?"

"I had...this friend."

Slowly, in a little voice, Rika began to talk.

I realized it might be easier for her if I didn't make her do all the talking.

"A girl?"

"Yes."

"Someone I know?"

"Probably not."

"Okay."

"Basically, we had a fight. Well, we fought a lot, but we'd never had one this big before. We haven't talked to each other for the past several months. Even if we run into each other at school, we don't speak. Because, I mean, just seeing her makes me mad."

“What was the fight about?”

“...I don’t want to say.”

She scuffed the sole of her shoe against the tiled pavement.

“It’s *not* my fault. There is literally no way to spin it where it’s not her fault. Just remembering what happened pisses me off. I’m constantly angry about it. I’m never forgiving her until she admits it.”

At that point, she stopped talking.

But it doesn’t always matter who was right; it hurt you a lot, and sometimes the sadness is too much.

I considered prompting her to go on but decided against it.

“Sounds like you’d been friends for a long time.”

“Yeah,” she said, although her voice was no more than a breath. “We met when we started middle school, so it’s been four or five years.”

It took a little effort for me to avoid recalling my own time in middle school. When I spoke, though, my words were completely heartfelt. “...That really sucks.”

“It’s the Netherlands.” The conversation derailed again. “The country with all the tulips and windmills and things. It’s ridiculous.”

“What?”

“She’s going there. On a plane. Because of a ‘family situation,’” she said mechanically, keeping each phrase separate.

“When?”

“Well, today, like I said.”

“Are you going to go say good-bye?”

“No. Obviously. I don’t want to go. I’ll just be all like ‘What’s with her?’ again... I mean, I have been thinking about it and all. I don’t have her contact information over there. I think relationships tend to be like that, though. And that’s that. But I’m all mad and antsy, so I wanted to be with somebody who’d help take my mind off it. Just stay with me until night comes, Fujisawa. All

right?”

As I listened to her lengthy explanation, I was getting more and more upset myself. Liquid anger worked its way up until I could feel it reaching my head. I'm impressed I managed to hold it in until she was done speaking. The moment she finished, I shouted.

“You idiot! What are you doing?!”

Rika flinched and shrank back.

“What time is the flight?”

“I don't know...”

“Yes, you do!”

“Um, it was seven or something, I'm pretty sure, but... Hey!”

I'd grabbed her wrist and started walking, pulling her with me. As I walked, I unfolded the metropolitan railway map in my head. During my first month in Tokyo, I'd studied that map and pounded the transfers into my head until I was used to the city. From Ikebukuro, we'd take the Yamanote Line to Nippori, transfer to the Keisei Main Line, then spend an hour on an express train. We could get there in ninety minutes. We'd make it in plenty of time. And I was pissed.

“That hurts, okay? Hey! Where are we going?!”

“To Narita, where else?!”

“No! I'm not going.”

“I'm not letting you run away.”

My voice was low and sort of strangled and scary, even to me. I didn't let go. I couldn't let her get away here. I marched toward the station, dragging her with me.

When we were just a few steps inside Ikebukuro Station—

“Hold on a minute—I mean it! I'm not going to run; just let go of my hand.” She sounded serious, so I finally released her. “Let's talk about this, all right? You're mad. Why?”

“Yes, I’m mad. Very,” I said. “I can’t let you do this.”

“Do what?”

“This is an important time, and you’re leaving this huge thing unresolved.”

“Look, I’m confused,” she said. “I mean, it’s just going to say good-bye. She’s not going to be overseas forever, either. I know her address and phone number here. You’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

“No, I’m not. You don’t get it,” I snapped. “This could be the last time you ever see her. What you don’t understand is that this *happens*. Some little accident could make you forget how to contact her. Class directories and address books can go missing. Memories fade. That’s all it takes to lose track of somebody forever. If you don’t go today, I promise you’ll regret it. Today may turn out to be a crossroads for you. If you decide you want to see her later, you may never get another chance. This is no time to nitpick about dumb stuff that doesn’t actually matter.”

“It’s not dumb...”

“Fine. It’s not dumb. But now isn’t the time to be nitpicky about it.”

I was as obstinate as an iron wall.

“...Let me think for a little.”

“Sure. Take your time and think. On the train.” I could see the tension on her face when she realized I wasn’t budging. “I’ll go buy our tickets.”

She had a prepaid card, but making her take a ticket would settle the issue faster. I bought two, and when I went back, she was still there. I handed her a ticket and nudged her forward, and she drifted listlessly through the ticket gate. I hadn’t really persuaded her; I think she was tired of fighting.

We boarded the Yamanote Line and got off at Nippori. When we transferred to the Keisei Main Line, we finally got to sit down. We were silent on the train. She put her hands on her knees, balling them into fists and then relaxing them

The express pulled into Narita Airport and stopped.

“We’re here.”

She was still in her seat.

“Right.” I’d started to get up, but then I sat back down again. “Want to think about it a little more together?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go.” Her voice was barely even a whisper.

She had already been feeling bad; had I been too harsh? The idea began to worry me.

Slowly, she stood up. She seemed tremendously unsteady, so without any ulterior motive, I took her hand. I felt her fingers softly squeeze mine back.

Holding hands, we walked toward the lobby.

She didn’t know the exact flight number or time, so I asked at a nearby counter, then confirmed the gate. I also asked an employee about how to have someone paged. Then I took Rika over to an airport floor map. Pointing at the map, I told her that they’d probably go from this meeting spot to that counter, so she should check that area; if she really couldn’t find them, she should use this excuse and ask to have them paged. She nodded meekly.

“All right, go for it. You can do it.”

If I stayed with her any longer, I’d probably just get in the way. I waved, then turned on my heel.

“No. Wait.” She caught the back of my shirt, and I stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

“Please wait here.”

“But...”

“Just wait.”

With that, she went off without waiting for me to respond. I leaned against the wall and waited for her to come back. The hall looked like it might be bigger than the athletic field at school, and it was filled with crowds of people coming and going, wheeling suitcases.

I closed my eyes and shut all the noise out of my mind.

Rika Mizuno is lucky, I thought. I was jealous.

The ability to connect with someone you trust is a truly fortunate thing. You'd think it's normal to have someone you can call and talk to whenever you want, but it was hard to come by.

I thought of Sayuri, and my chest ached. I didn't have a single way to connect with her.

Had Rika managed to meet up with her friend? I hadn't heard the page, so she probably had. I was as happy as if I was the one who'd gotten this chance.

I should probably call Takuya Shirakawa right this minute. I knew that. But I couldn't do it. I didn't want to. When it was about me, I was completely hopeless. I was in no position to talk down to Rika about these things.

I don't know how much time went by.

When I looked up, Rika was standing there.

She'd been crying, and she looked awful. Her eyes were bright red.

Rubbing at her eyes and under her nose, she thanked me over and over, like a child. "Thank you...thank you..."

I touched her thin shoulders—and then realized I wouldn't be able to abdicate the responsibility I'd just taken for her.

On the train on the way home, Rika rested her head on my shoulder, exhausted.

"You know, Fujisawa, I thought you were a much colder person."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. You're friendly to everybody, but I got the feeling you didn't really care what happened to anybody at all. I thought you weren't interested in people. That they didn't matter to you, and that's why you were able to get along with everybody. You were just too good at it for others to pick up on what you were doing."

"You might be right about that."

"No, I wasn't."

The weight on my shoulder rose slightly, shook from side to side, then came

back down. It felt less like she was leaning against me and more like she was pushing her head into me.

“You see, I do have a dad and mom, but...”

And she began to talk about herself. The way she referred to her parents as if they only technically existed was telling.

“I mean, it’s not uncommon, but they’re busy with work, and they’ve got their hands full with their own problems. That’s probably not *why*, exactly, but they’re not all that interested in me. They never have been. I’m used to it; they’ve been like that since I was little. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, though.”

“Yeah.” I agreed without nodding, so that I wouldn’t jostle her.

“And it’s not really because of that, I guess,” she said, “but I have a hard time believing in friendships, and connections, and trust. That’s how I am.”

“Uh-huh.”

“When I was younger, I hated it when they shuffled classes. As soon as they were in a different class, people I used to get along with would avoid me and drift away. It happened several times, and I always took it really hard. It hurt. And it seemed to hurt me so much more than them.”

I just kept on agreeing with her.

“I always wondered why they were immune to it. And then I figured it out—they didn’t really let anything affect them. That was the key. The idea came as a surprise, but I was so sure it was the right move. If you don’t want life to hurt too much, you can’t afford to get too involved with anyone. It’s important to just let things flow past you. And that realization made everything so much easier. I was finally a real member of the group. That’s what made me notice you, Fujisawa. I thought ‘There’s a guy who’s doing what I do, only really, really well,’ and I assumed you were doing it as consciously as I was. That’s what made me want to talk to you. I thought I could keep it super easy and casual with you. What do you think?”

“That’s a really interesting mindset.”

“I was wrong, though. You really believe in connections. I wasn’t ready for that.”

“Do I really?”

“The girl I went to today was the only exception. She was the one person I’d actually let myself get attached to and vice versa. We’d been in the same class all the way through middle school, until last year. She meant a lot to me. But our relationship got all messed up, and then she was going to be moving overseas, and I gave up. I thought, ‘Oh well, that’s just how things are. We just happened to be together for so long that I made assumptions.’ I was this close to just letting her go.”

She started crying softly again.

I held very still, listening to her.

Through me, Rika was trying to resettle herself in the place where she really should be. She probably needed me.

She was looking to me for help. Just the way Sayuri had tried to tell the two of us something, long ago.

Did I have the strength now, though? She had me pinned. Right now, I was just letting life wash over me, riding everything out. The power bubbling inside me during the last hot summer of middle school was nowhere to be found now.

I had failed to fly the Velaciela. Back then, Takuya and I had the power to take to the skies, but it was gone. It had gone with Sayuri. I didn’t even have the strength to save myself now.

But practically speaking, I’d already gotten too deeply involved with Rika to turn back. I owed it to her to be responsible.

Apparently, I’d managed to point her in the right direction today. At least I could manage that.

In that case, I’d just have to start from there.

I put a hand on her hair. It was faintly warm from the heat of her body.

She closed her eyes and rested more of her weight on me.

I chased away the image of that dream—of Sayuri sobbing in the forest of towers in an alien place. I tried to, anyway.

5

The enormous forest of towers rose like stalagmites made of a material like unglazed pottery. Sayuri was there, on the very top of one of them.

There was no one around but her. She was all alone.

Aside from her, the only sound was the wind.

She was standing forlornly on the edge of the tower. Above her was a faded sky. Below her was more sky of that same color. The towers stretched on forever. The farther away they got, the thinner they became, until finally they disappeared into a haze. Most likely, they continued on forever.

She crouched down, hugging her knees.

All she could hear was the wind.

She was unbearably discouraged and lonely.

“Somebody...”

Her voice was barely audible.

“I’m lonely... I don’t want to be... I don’t want to be alone... Somebody, anybody...”

The wind nearly drowned out her faint cries.

“Somebody stay with me.”

There was no one to listen to her request.

“Hiroki, Takaya, I’m so alone. There’s nobody here. Why am I here?” Sayuri kept talking to herself. “I don’t want to be here. I feel like I’ve always been here, but I’m not sure why. Please...”

Sayuri spoke as though she was writing a letter to a friend, a letter she had no way to send.

“Please help me...”

In my dream, I listened to her.

*

A letter arrived from Mr. Okabe.

One night, when I got back to the dorm and opened my mailbox, there was a crisp white envelope inside. After I went into my room and put down my stuff, I opened the envelope and read it, but to be honest, I didn't want to.

He'd written about what had been happening lately back at home. Tensions between the US-Japan alliance and the Union had risen sharply over the past few years, and Emishi Manufacturing had gotten really busy. He grumbled that they were shorthanded, since Takuya had stopped working there part-time. Takuya had apparently thrown himself into his studies. He was the type who could handle schoolwork without actually caring about it, so he was doing some sort of independent study, not regular high school stuff. The letter said I'd be allowed to help out with all the work I wanted, so come back anytime. He didn't mention either Sayuri or the Velaciela, which was a huge relief.

He said to send a reply.

I didn't feel like it.

I let the hand with the letter fall limply. I drew a deep breath. It had taken quite a lot of effort to read through two sheets of stationary.

Every time my mind turned toward my hometown, my body started feeling heavy, and my mood soured. I didn't want anyone to make me think about it. It hurt to remember what I'd lost.

That letter had been written to a different version of me, a strong boy who feared nothing. More than anything, I wanted them to spare me that. The light and power I'd had within me years ago were long gone. The place that had held them was packed with a weight far too heavy for its size.

I leaned against the wall and slid down it, into a crouch.

I started wanting to let the tears well. I wanted to cry. Get it all out of my system. No tears came, though. The lead weights stayed inside me.

I was reexperiencing what a heavy blow Sayuri's loss had dealt me. I'd failed to fly that plane to that tower. It was pathetic. I knew just how much that had

hurt me. All the things I'd tried to bury were shaken awake by Mr. Okabe's letter.

Once again, I was reminded with certainty that I'd never be able to go back there. I couldn't live looking up at my torn dreams and the remnants of former possibilities.

I threw the letter to the ground, left my apartment, and locked the door. I wanted to keep the letter locked away in there.

I wandered aimlessly through the dark, old residential streets. Wood-framed plaster apartment buildings stood in rows, ready for a decent earthquake to flatten them. The houses were mostly finished with darkened plaster as well. Every so often, the light from vending machines illuminated the street. When I peeked into alleys, I'd see abandoned, decaying street stalls. Being out in the cool night air helped me relax a little.

I caught the smell of dirt, and I glanced that way.

A chain-link construction fence had been put up along the road to keep people out. A backhoe was parked behind it, and the earth had been dug up just a little.

When I looked beyond the construction site, the futuristic high-rises of Nishi-Shinjuku glittered and shone far in the distance. There were lights in almost every window, and their outer walls, which had mirror finishes or were coated with expensive tiles, were lit up from below.

Who was inside those and what were they doing?

I couldn't imagine it. It didn't seem real at all. Were all those high-rises truly part of this world? It looked like a mirage of an inhuman city from some other world.

That's not real. Can't be.

It felt as counterfeit as a hologram projected on the sky.

I gazed at those inorganic, soaring towers for a while, squinting and scowling.

I only exist here. How can I become a part of that view?

I stayed like that until my neck got tired.

When I looked away, the vision of the group of stalagmite towers I'd seen in my dream of Sayuri was superimposed on the buildings.

It was just a fleeting illusion, but it affected me far more than I thought.

Oh.

It's real.

6

Over about a month or two, Rika broke up with her boyfriend. I wouldn't have minded the fact that she was dating someone else, but she said she wanted to do this right.

"I decided I'm going to be purposeful with my relationships."

"Wow, sounds like you've got it together now."

"Doesn't it?" She gave an offbeat answer, then laughed. "Still, I couldn't tell you how things turned out like this. I didn't take you seriously at first, Fujisawa. Like, at all."

"You didn't?"

"Nope. That's why I thought I could just randomly drag you places when it was convenient. It's so weird. Maybe you're just a very special kind of person."

"What do you mean, 'special'? I don't have any redeeming features. It's a real headache."

"You're playing dumb again." Rika gave a closed-lipped and vaguely reproachful smile. "I notice these things. You know you're extraordinary, and so do I. I think about myself that way, so I know."

I said nothing.

Qualitatively, the way Rika and I spent time together didn't change all that much. We'd have lunch together once in a while, and we'd started spending the time after school let out with each other, but that was about it.

One day, the first clear one after several straight days of rain, Rika asked me to slip out of school with her at lunch, and we went to eat at a diner on the

second floor of a nearby building. She ordered gratin, and I asked for a chicken-and-veggie rice porridge set meal. Everything I ate came from convenience stores, and I was sick of pasta and fried foods, so when I ate out, I ended up ordering things a boy my age doesn't normally.

"You're like an old man," she said, laughing.

"Well, what do you usually eat, since you live on your own?"

"In the morning, I have coffee. Bread for lunch. For dinner, I go to the convenience store."

"Wow, those are classic terrible eating habits. You're going to wreck your health."

"Yeah."

"Don't just agree with me."

"I do take a multivitamin, technically. Besides, I'm just not that interested in eating."

"That's definitely weird. How can you not be interested in eating?"

Rika looked at me uncertainly, as if she was unsure whether to say what was on her mind.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking how great I'd look if I could tell you I'd start making lunches for you."

I laughed. "It's fine—you don't have to do that."

"I know. I won't. You hate gushy stuff like that, don't you?"

"Yeah, well. I wouldn't know what to say when you gave one to me."

"I am so not a morning person. Even if I change my mind, seriously, don't get your hopes up."

"It's okay—I won't."

"But I also wish you would, just a little."

Again, I didn't know how to react to that. She thought for several moments,

then went on.

“Okay, so I’ve been making all my own meals for a while now. That means I’m pretty good at cooking, even if I may not look like it. You should keep that in mind. Technically.”

“I never said I doubted you.” I remembered the family issues she’d told me about earlier.

“So if you have any requests, I can go over and cook you something. How about it? And this is a serious question.”

“Huh...?”

That had come up with bewildering abruptness. After giving it some thought, I told her, “No, don’t worry about it. I’d feel bad.” Come to think of it, I’d never had any friends over to my apartment. “The place is really dirty. I’d be embarrassed.”

“I wouldn’t care.”

“It’s probably way worse than you’re imagining.”

I told her about my dorm, exaggerating how run-down and gloomy and damp it was. Rika laughed out loud. “Now I’m intrigued. What do you usually do at home?”

“Nothing really. I do my homework, prep for lessons or review, and listen to music or read books... Sometimes I play the violin.”

“The violin? You play?” Apparently, that was a surprise.

“Well, a little.”

“Huh? Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’? I can play because I’ve been practicing, but...”

“I wanna hear!” Rika leaned over the table, pushing her face closer to me.

“No, no way.” I shook my head emphatically. “I’m lousy at it.”

“That’s fine—I don’t care if you’re good or bad. Let’s go to the music room right now.”

“Nooo, c’mon, give me a break here. Really! Anything but that.”

“Awww. That’s no fun.”

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, I discovered I didn’t intend to let anyone else hear me play the violin.

Being with Rika was fun, and I was able to relax when I was around her. And yet for some reason, I didn’t want to let her see me holding an instrument. It was bizarre, wrong somehow, and yet...

And the seasons changed. Winter came, then spring, and I started my third year of high school.

When they shuffled our classes, Rika and I got separated, but it didn’t change our relationship much. We took the same supplementary lectures as often as possible, and we sat next to each other. We never talked it out, exactly, but we had a system of alternately picking each other up at our separate classrooms and then walking home together.

What had changed was that I’d started to dream about Sayuri frequently, once every few days. The peculiar space she was in, the one that looked like a faded photograph, felt very familiar to me, although I didn’t know why.

Conversely, the waking world felt less and less real. The colors of the sky and the roadside trees and the townscapes looked like painted pictures. Every time I peered at the view, I just felt alone. When I was with Rika, I was able to forget the unease for a few moments, but the mismatch between myself and reality was still there inside me.

Every so often, I’d go out at night and head over to a nearby station. I’d go down the stairs and stand in front of the ticket gate at Nishi-Shinjuku Station, on the Marunouchi Line, or Shinjuku-Nishiguchi Station, on the Oedo Line, and stay there for an hour or so, acting like I was waiting for someone. If I mingled with strangers that way, maybe I could blend into the surrounding scenery.

It didn’t happen. I was as out of place as ever, but with sore feet now.

Just because I was waiting there, that didn’t mean anyone would show up. Of course they wouldn’t. This wasn’t like the local train, where if I waited patiently at the station on the way home from school, I was bound to run into someone I

knew.

Everyone going through the ticket gates, in or out, looked the same to me. Anonymous currents flowing past. It looked like a crowd scene in a low-budget movie, nothing like reality at all.

Partly unconsciously, I began wanting to pick out a specific person I knew from the sea. I wanted to go greet them. But I couldn't visualize the specific face I should be looking for. The people continued on their way, toward the trains or out of the station, and I stayed immobile. I wanted to become a faceless, anonymous person. I wanted to be part of the colony. I wanted to become ghostlike.

But, of course, I couldn't. I didn't belong in this city.

7

I'll stop here for a moment to talk just a little about something that happened long after everything was over.

It's about a letter.

I started grad school after graduating from university, and this happened the year I finished, so I was twenty-six. That spring, I got a letter from Takuya.

To be accurate, it wasn't exactly a letter. It was a small parcel.

There were no seasonal greetings or postscripts to rekindle old friendships, or anything of the sort. He hadn't even written a residential address or contact information. It was the first I'd heard from him in eight years; he'd been gone for all of them. He hadn't written his address because he didn't intend to tell me what it was. Takuya Shirakawa would never accidentally forget to write one.

The parcel held a daily journal. That was when I first found out he'd been keeping it. The one he'd sent me held the three years of his time in high school, no more and no less.

I read it, and it detailed the events and thoughts and feelings during those three years we'd been apart.

I understood exactly why he'd sent me that journal. He was telling me not to

forget—about himself, about Sayuri, about that extraordinary summer in our third year of middle school, and about the subsequent three-year ice age. About everything that had given decisive direction to Takuya and me during those few brief years. About the extraordinary people we'd once been.

Don't erase those from your memory. Don't let time wash them away. Don't pretend they never existed, he was warning me.

Of course, I have no intention of forgetting. Sayuri once quietly told us she didn't want to be forgotten, and I still remember.

That's why I'm writing these words.

8

That day, it had been drizzling since morning. Inside the military college, temperature and humidity were both perfectly controlled, but Takuya could feel something like the suggestion of rain seeping in through the concrete.

In his third year of high school, Takuya Shirakawa frequented the US Army College in Aomori City as an external researcher. He was affiliated with the Wartime Special Strategic Information Processing Laboratory, commonly known as the Tomisawa Lab. They'd scouted him during spring of that year. The previous year, Takuya had entered several essay contests in academic quantum physics journals, and won. Apparently, that had gotten their attention. He didn't learn until much later that Okabe had covertly recommended him through his connections.

The offer had come with the bonuses of an enrollment recommendation and tuition exemption, so Takuya had jumped at it without thinking twice. Then, aside from taking the minimum number of credits, he'd stopped going to high school. He'd seen almost no value in his classes or student life there.

Once he joined the lab, he began attending seminars with grad students. He had to write papers frequently, and when large-scale experiments were conducted, he assisted as part of the staff. Practically speaking, he didn't have the time to spare for high school classes. At the Tomisawa Lab, he used computers to analyze quantum physics; it required sophisticated programming

skills, but that was his specialty. For the first time in his life, he was learning somewhere that didn't bore him.

They were conducting a large-scale experiment that day, and the preparations had had them running all over since morning. The laboratory building, constructed just two years ago, was a concrete structure with no windows at all, and the experiment was being conducted on its eighth floor.

Takuya was seated in front of a console along with two grad students, and each of them was facing an LCD monitor and keyboard. Takuya had brought in his own keyboard and hooked it up; he got stressed when he couldn't keep up his usual speed on the lab's.

Behind the monitors was a glass wall, and beyond it was the core of the laboratory. The space was a little over three hundred square feet in area, and it was completely airtight. In its center was a pillar so thick that three adults holding hands might have been able to form a circle around it. The pillar's shape was quite complicated; from its design, it could have passed for a modern art sculpture.

In actuality, it was an antenna used to pick up parallel worlds.

There was another glass wall behind Takuya. On the other side of glass, one tier higher, were the central monitoring seats, occupied by Professor Tomisawa and his assistant, Arisaka. Behind them, a uniformed US Army officer and a man in a suit had come to observe.

"Don't let our guests bother you. Carry on as usual," Tomisawa said through a speaker to Takuya and the others. "First phase finished. Let's move on."

"Yes, sir," Takuya and the grad students responded. They all began typing at once.

"Next: filtration stage. Beginning second phase," Takuya said into the mic.

"Directivity resolution increased by twenty-five percent from previous attempt," added one of the graduate students.

Tomisawa seemed satisfied. "Very nice. Let's see if we make it this time. Choose those algorithms carefully."

Arisaka was checking Takuya's work from over his shoulder. "Shirakawa, what is that algorithm?"

"I revised the group sampling filtering, based on a paper by Ekusun Tsukinoe..."

"What...?"

"The sampling efficiency should be improved."

"Well done, Shirakawa," Tomisawa praised him heartily.

The uniformed soldier asked a question in English. "Who's Ekusun Tsukinoe?"

Tomisawa answered, also in English. "The Union researcher who first proved the existence of parallel worlds. He's said to have been the designer of the Ezo tower."

"And that spiral"—the uniformed man indicated to the laboratory antenna—"is a model of the tower?"

"Exactly. We're about to replace a few square inches of space around that pillar with space from a different universe."

An alarm sounded. Everyone tensed.

"Got it!" Takuya cried. They all stared at the monitor. "Exposure response confirmed in directions XA, YC, and ZC. Five...no, six branch universes present."

Six curved lines squirmed on the graph on the monitor.

"Six, hmm? You've found quite a few." Tomisawa clasped his fingers together. "Begin synchronization stage. Come on, connect for us..."

Arisaka responded, issuing orders. "Beginning third phase. You three, each of you approach the closest parallel universe and attempt connection."

Takuya and the two grad students typed away, connecting the system to the branch universes they'd discovered in a frantic clacking of keys. The grad student who was sitting on Takuya's right looked at his hands and murmured, "Dang, he's fast..."

"Shirakawa is the closest," Arisaka muttered. "Twelve exas left to potential connection territory. Eleven, ten, nine-point-four, nine-point-two..."

The alarm sounded again.

The uniformed man leaned forward.

“Connection established!” Takuya was speaking rapidly now. “Successful connection to one of the neighboring branch universes. Exposure response is also stable.”

Tomisawa, who’d stood up without thinking, sat back down. “Good, shift straight into the conversion stage.” Then he turned to the uniformed man and explained. “Now we’ll switch space with the branch universe.”

“Fourth phase. Begin spatial replacement with the parallel world,” Arisaka ordered.

One curving line was displayed on a red graph.

The alarm changed pitch.

“Spatial phase replacement with a radius of sixty nanos confirmed. Expanding rapidly. It will be visible to the naked eye shortly.”

One of the monitors cut to a camera feed. In its center was a blurred, dark area.

“That one spot is composed of matter from a different universe,” Tomisawa explained, in English.

“Can the Ezo tower do the same thing?”

“That’s right. The principle is exactly the same. However, the scale is much larger over there and far more precise. We only succeed once every few tries, and we’re just barely able to replace an area the size of a grain of sand.”

Takuya and the grad students continued inputting their complex commands without pause.

Then Takuya’s hands stopped. “Outta luck...,” he murmured.

“It’s no good. Exposure response attenuating. We can’t hold the connection with the parallel world any longer,” Arisaka reported anxiously.

The oscillations of the curved line on the graph weakened. Before long, a buzzer sounded, and the word *Disconnected* was displayed on every monitor in

red letters.

The black spot in the camera feed had also vanished.

Takuya sighed, letting his tension drain away. He leaned back in his chair.

At almost the same time, in the monitor room behind him, Tomisawa sighed, too. However, his sigh was a satisfied one.

“Wave function converging. The branch universes have been lost completely. Phase replacement of space with a radius of one-point-three millimeters was successful for one minute and eighteen seconds,” Arisaka reported dispassionately into the silence.

“Maki.”

When Takuya got his materials together and left the laboratory, Maki Kasahara was standing there, talking with Tomisawa.

Maki was a doctoral program researcher who was acting as Takuya’s tutor. She specialized in brain science. Since they specialized in different fields, Takuya hadn’t received any direct instruction from her, but he was supposed to report facility usage and progress on submissions to her in detail.

After smiling at Takuya and telling him “Good work,” Maki turned back to Tomisawa. “Professor, may I take Shirakawa along?”

“Sure, he’s free now. You two are always together, aren’t you?”

“You were the one who told me to stick with him for the year, Professor.”

“Was I...? I’ll be in Tokyo on business starting tomorrow, so thanks in advance for your help.”

“For the research findings report, right?”

“That, too, but it sounds as though they’ve found the key we were discussing. You and the rest of the brain science team may be about to get extra busy...”

Takuya didn’t know what they were talking about, so he listened quietly.

Takuya and Maki walked side by side down a corridor with a glossy floor and walls. Maki always walked relatively quickly. Takuya usually took the habit to mean someone was confident. Many researchers were like that, and so was he.

The laboratory building was large, which made speed especially helpful. They passed a pair of men, one in a military uniform and the other in a suit. They were the ones who'd observed the experiment earlier.

"Military personnel have been coming by quite a lot lately," Maki said.

"The one in the suit is probably NSA," Takuya told her.

"NSA?"

"The National Security Agency."

"Is that like the Public Safety Commission?"

"More like military spies."

"Hmm." Maki didn't seem to have much to say about that. "There have been a lot of rumors about covert terrorist activity lately, I suppose."

Takuya looked down. Year by year, he'd grown worse at hiding it when he was troubled. Fortunately, she didn't notice.

They stood in front of the elevator, watching the floor numbers count up.

"Did today's experiment go well?"

"We got some data, but there's still a long way to go. We just barely managed a replacement big enough to be seen with the naked eye. It's nowhere near the Union's tower."

"That was inevitable. They learned the basic physics first, and they have a huge lead on us. That aerial photo of Ezo... I saw it, too."

Takuya remembered the shudder he'd felt the first time he'd seen that photo.

The image had been shot and transmitted by a US military recon drone, and it showed a view of the Union's tower from the sky.

It wasn't the tower itself that was abnormal, but its surroundings.

A discolored, pitch-black area spread out from the tower in a concentric circle. It looked as if the ground had been painted black, but that wasn't it.

There was nothing there—or perhaps what was there was a void in the truest sense of the word.

Takuya thought a black hole might look something like it—a dark abyss that constantly sucked in light. The feel of it bore a striking resemblance to the black stain they'd created in the laboratory.

An inversion of the world.

Around the tower, the world had been turned inside out. The space that belonged there had vanished, and another world had encroached on this one.

A chime pinged, and the elevator doors opened.

"What I don't understand is why the phase conversion is stopped at a radius of two kilometers around the tower," Takuya commented, watching the floor numbers as they ticked down. It was a habit of his. He'd catch himself staring at the remaining time on his computer counter or at defrag screens. "The US military thinks the tower is a powerful weapon that inverts space. If it was made with offense in mind, though, it's pretty worthless right now. They just randomly put a hole in their own country."

"I wonder if there was an accident that made it stop functioning. Maybe it's an experimental facility for that and nothing else."

"Either that or the phase conversion itself is a side effect that ran out of control. Professor Tomisawa says he suspects there's some external factor that's keeping the tower in check."

When they left the laboratory building, rain was falling through the gloom.

Takuya had left his umbrella in his locker in the lecture building. Maki had a collapsible umbrella, so they shared it, walking through the college's outer gardens together.

"Say, Shirakawa? What are you doing tomorrow? You don't have school, do you?" The next day was a Saturday.

"There's something I'd like to look into, so..." As Takuya spoke, he was conscious of Maki's shoulder touching his own.

"The library?"

"No, a factory. I know a guy there."

"A factory?"

Maki said that as long as she wouldn't be in the way, she wanted to come with. Takuya tried to tell her it was a long drive and there was nothing out there, but Maki wouldn't be dissuaded. He'd left his cell phone in the grad students' room, so he asked Maki to wait, went into a telephone booth, and dialed a familiar number.

"They want to see it? Look, kid, we don't do company tours here."

Okabe sounded cross on the other end of the line, but when Takuya told him a little about Maki, his attitude did a one-eighty.

"What?! A girl? How old is she?"

"I don't know. But, I mean, she's pretty. I think..."

Maki was idly looking away on the other side of the glass. Her profile was at least twice as lovely as the average face.

"Oh-ho. Okay then, we'll be waiting," Okabe cheerfully agreed.

The next day, Takuya and Maki drove to Ookawadai. Takuya was the one driving the dark-colored sedan. As soon as he'd turned eighteen, he'd begun attending a driving school and had gotten his license. He picked up Maki in Aomori City, then sped up Route 280 along the coast, reaching Emishi Manufacturing in an hour and a half.

The weather was fine. Black kites called, and a formation of loud US fighter jets was etching contrails across the sky. They stopped the car beside the big tree in the courtyard. When they got out, the steel towers installed on the factory lot attracted Maki's attention.

"Wow... Those antennas are incredible."

"A few of 'em are just a bit illegal, though," Okabe explained, hands stuck in the pockets of his slacks and a cigarette between his teeth. Takuya knew that most of them were illegal, not just a few, but he kept quiet. "They let us listen to some interesting places."

"How about that. Is it a hobby? Or for work?"

"Well, about half and half."

Maki Kasahara was beautiful, just as he'd been told, and Okabe looked

satisfied. The semi-stray cat that had taken up residence at the factory put in an appearance, and Takuya went over to give it a scratch behind the ears.

With all the shutters in one wall open, Emishi Manufacturing looked like an immense garage. The autumn breeze blew into the plant. The factory wasn't operating today, and the only other employee there was Satou. Maki had brought some cake as a present, so Takuya went to the kitchenette and made tea. An aluminum table had been placed under the eaves, and the four of them sat down.

"So, Miss Maki, your specialty is brain research?" Okabe asked.

"Yes. I work with memories, sleep, and dreams."

"But you're at the same lab as Takuya, right?" said Satou. "Takuya, weren't you researching the tower?"

"Yes. I'm focusing on the tower..." He thought for a minute. "Our fundamental objectives are the same, though. I'm not sure how to put it. For both of us, the research involves parallel worlds."

"Parallel worlds?" Satou echoed.

Maki dug her fork into a piece of cake. "The universe dreams, you see, just like people dream at night."

"It does...?" said Satou.

"Or maybe it's easier to picture if I say 'the world,'" Maki went on smoothly. "The world's dreams hold various possibilities, all sorts of different ways history might have gone. We call them parallel worlds, or branch universes."

"That sounds like sci-fi," Satou said. "I read about something like that in a book, ages back. Parallel worlds..."

"Do in fact exist," Maki said. "We've learned as much over the past fifty years or so."

"Are you serious?" Okabe asked.

"Yes. This is a well-known example, but..." Maki mimed flipping a coin with her thumb. "You know the game where you flip a coin and guess which will come up, heads or tails? Before you flip it, the possibility of tails is equal to the

possibility of heads. Then you actually flip it, and it turns out to be heads. Before you flipped it, there was a fifty percent possibility that it would be tails. Where did that go?”

Both Okabe and Satou listened attentively. “Wasn’t it always one hundred percent heads, and people just didn’t know?” Satou asked.

“Wave function collapse,” Maki said. “Yes, for a long time, that’s how we thought about it. However, that fifty percent really is fifty percent. It isn’t that one possibility was one hundred percent from the beginning. The way we think about it now is that when you flipped the coin, the world split into two worlds, one where heads came up and another where tails came up. In other words, even now, at this very moment, the world is moving through a kind of reverse tournament bracket, splitting more times than you can count.”

“Huh...”

“That’s the basic background, anyway. My research is investigating the influence these parallel worlds have on human brains and dreams.” At that point, the conversation returned to the original topic. “The theory that the Union’s tower is observing parallel worlds is a persuasive one. Shirakawa is working from that angle, the technological approach. My approach is from the angle of brain science. Have the brains of living creatures been unconsciously intercepting information from parallel worlds since antiquity? Could the source of human premonitions and precognition be information from branch universes traveling through brains? ...Those are the kinds of questions I’m investigating. It does sound rather occult, though, doesn’t it?”

“No, no, not at all.” Okabe shook his pack of cigarettes and put one between his lips, speaking in an exaggerated way. “You mean people are seeing the dreams of the universe. Damn, ain’t that romantic?”

“‘Romantic’?” Takuya and Satou muttered in unison. Few men who used that word were as bad a match for it as Okabe.

“...You got somethin’ to say?”

“No.”

“Not really.” Satou and Takuya both played dumb.

“So you mentioned premonitions and precognition. Does that mean that your research could make it possible for humans to make predictions artificially?” Satou asked.

“No... I doubt that’s possible. At least, I don’t think we’ll ever realize anything like a supernatural ability.”

“Why not?”

“Because humans don’t have an antenna for that,” Takuya answered. “We have ‘antennas’ to receive a certain type of electromagnetic wave that allows us to perceive shapes and colors. That’s our eyes. We have ears that pick up vibrations in the air. But we don’t have an organ that can receive information from other worlds. Even if it happens, it’s just a coincidence. Like a disconnected speaker picking up radio waves for a second, once in a blue moon.”

He cast a casual glance around at the numerous radio antennas in the yard.

“Let’s see. If we wanted humans to detect them, we might need to connect man-made antennas directly to their brains...”

“Blargh, sounds like a horror movie.” Satou reacted with disgust.

“There are people doing animal experiments along those lines.” As she spoke, Maki was nonchalantly eating her cake. “But at present, the research isn’t exactly promising.”

“I’m impressed, Miss Maki,” Okabe commented with a puff of smoke, although the flattery sounded a little contrived. “That Aomori college isn’t like your average university. It’s a governmental advisory body. Working on staff there at your age...”

“Oh, no, I...” Maki sounded embarrassed. “But I’ve always been fascinated by that tower, so the work feels very worthwhile.”

In spite of himself, Takuya glanced at Maki. He’d never heard this before.

“Shirakawa’s the really incredible one!” Maki suddenly declared.

“He is?” Satou said.

“Of course! He’s an external researcher at eighteen; it’s unprecedented. He’s

more enthusiastic about the work than anyone else, and some of the older staff members are nowhere near as smart as him. I never knew someone like him even existed; he's incredible."

Stealthily so that Maki wouldn't see it, Okabe grimaced, and Satou smirked with sympathy.

"No, that's not... I'm really not..."

Takuya demurred quietly. The cat rubbed up against his ankle, so he gave it a little of his cake. Delighted, the cat pounced on it.

"Huh?! You're kidding! What's that cat doing?!" Maki's eyes went round.

That evening, Takuya drove Maki back to her house in Aomori City. Okabe said he had business in the city, so he ended up riding with them. Satou had been surprised to hear it when Okabe had brought it up, and Maki had looked disappointed, but Takuya had easily agreed. As far as he was concerned, Okabe's presence was very welcome.

They dropped Maki off in front of her house, waved, and watched her until she disappeared inside. Okabe refastened his seat belt.

"Would you drop me at the station?"

"Where are you going now, Mr. Okabe? Hachinohe?"

"No, the Shinkansen. I've got business in Tokyo starting tomorrow."

"Which line of work?"

Okabe blew smoke into the air instead of answering.

Takuya's sedan was driving down a two-lane road in a residential district. When they hit a red light and stopped, Takuya tried again.

"Mr. Okabe, did you think about that request?"

Gazing up at the ceiling from where he'd reclined in his seat, Okabe mumbled an answer around his cigarette.

"What was it again?"

"I asked you to let me work with Uilta."

Uilta was the name of the indigenous people of Sakhalin, and also of the most active anti-Union armed terrorist group in Japan.

“Oh, that.” He blew more smoke. “Kid, you don’t know when to quit. Sounds like you’re working your ass off at that lab. You’re researching the tower, right? Then you can’t exactly afford to help us out, can you?”

Okabe always dodged him this way.

“That’s not true. As a matter of fact...there’s something I need to take care of.”

Just then, Takuya realized he could see a thin, perpendicular white line through the windshield. He glared at it as he spoke.

“The tower—I want to get rid of it. The sooner the better.”

*Minutes of the 23rd Japan-US Military Research Findings Report
(excerpt)*

*Report date: Year **** Month ** Day ***

Venue: Yasuda Auditorium, University of Tokyo

*Report made by: Tsuneo Tomisawa, Wartime
Special Strategic Information Processing
Laboratory, Aomori Army College*

“...As you can see, it’s possible to predict the future with extremely high precision by detecting the deviation in the branching multiverse ahead of us. That is the ultimate goal of my laboratory. This is not a conventional theoretical model or probability theory. It is merely information based on real future results—real in the sense that they have actually occurred in a branch universe. It’s knowing in advance what will happen after we turn the page. The influence this will have on political and military decisions is not incalculable...

“But frankly speaking, we must assume that the level of the Union’s practical quantum gravity theory technology is already incomparably more sophisticated than our own. If the situation remains unchanged as we advance, the Union will be the one to realize practical quantum prediction.”

Four photographs displayed on screen.

Aerial photo of central Hokkaido from 1974 (omitted)

Aerial photo of central Hokkaido from 1984 (omitted)

Aerial photo of central Hokkaido from 1994 (omitted)

Aerial photo of central Hokkaido from 1997 (omitted)

“The construction of that tower in central Hokkaido...central Ezo, began in ’74, just after the North-South split. We estimate that it began operating around ’96. In reconnaissance photos from ’97, there is already a clear phase shift around the tower.

“In an ironic twist of fate for those of us in the alliance, Ekusun Tsukinoe, who is said to have played a central role in the tower’s design, is originally from Honshu.

“...Now then, I’ll present several new technical efforts that are currently being conducted so that we can actually detect information from parallel worlds.”

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A few days passed. During that time, Takuya made very good progress on his work. He stayed holed up in the grad students’ room, without going home, and completed two papers. When he got tired, he made a row of chairs and napped on them.

After a full night in front of a monitor until morning, he was exhausted. He e-mailed his papers to Tomisawa, then passed the morning doing odd jobs. When his fatigue grew intolerable, he went to the parking lot and napped in the car. When he woke up, it was dark. He felt awful, as if he had been left out of the world and the flow of time.

When he turned on his cell phone, he noticed that Maki had called twice. That made him feel better, if only a little. However, he wasn’t inclined to call her back. Instead, he punched in a different number. It was one he dialed often, but it wasn’t stored in the phone’s memory. He promptly erased records of all calls to or from it as well.

“It’s Shirakawa.”

“...Yeah.” Okabe always sounded so put upon when he called.

“Could I meet you somewhere soon?”

Okabe just happened to be in the city right then. Takuya brought the seat back up and started the engine.

The old pub, run by a single elderly woman who was pushing eighty, was located by Aomori Port. As he crossed the modern, pure-white Aomori Bay Bridge from west to east, Takuya mused, *If the Union Army did come ashore, this bridge would probably be their first target.* When he opened the wooden

sliding door and entered the pub, Okabe was already pouring sake for himself. Takuya sat down next to him at the counter. The aged proprietor was napping on the other side of it.

“How was your business trip to Tokyo?” he asked Okabe, pouring himself a drink.

“Hunh?” Okabe grunted dubiously.

“Well, a business trip around this time wouldn’t be Uilta-related.”

Okabe snorted. “Forget that. What’s Hiroki up to? Thought I’d pay him a quick visit while I was in Tokyo, but I couldn’t get ahold of him.”

Takuya could feel his expression souring. “He’s... I don’t know what he’s up to. Doesn’t matter to me anymore.”

“...Hmm.”

“When are you hitting the tower?”

Okabe gave up on the other thread of conversation. “Actually, we got our hands on a PL-coated bomb.”

“PL...”

“You know about those?”

“No... I’m not familiar with those.”

“I dunno much about it, either, but they said something about a reaction with palladium and deuterium.”

“Damn...” Takuya knew what that meant. “That’s incredible.”

“How so?”

“I can’t be sure without seeing the specs, but it’s probably the rough equivalent of an ultrasmall nuclear weapon.”

“Ah. Okay. It’ll make for a hell of a show, then.” Okabe lit a new cigarette. “So the question is, will it work on the tower?”

“It should...,” Takuya answered promptly. “That tower isn’t built to be sturdy. You need a certain type of flexibility for a structure that tall and delicate. The

exterior will evaporate instantly, and intel says interior is filled with nanonet ribbons; those will burn away. My money says it'll all disappear without a trace."

"It will, huh?"

Takuya lit a cigarette of his own. "But no average terrorist group would be able to get a bomb like that."

"Sharp kid."

"What is the US Army trying to do? Once a mini-nuke gets involved, everyone will know they were pulling the strings."

"No idea. Maybe they've got a solid cover story all ready to go, or maybe it's connected to some internal power struggle... Or maybe they're assuming they won't need a cover story."

"War."

"Yeah, probably."

"You think they're trying to make it happen?"

"Could be."

"But it won't matter to Uilta either way, will it? Your goal is reunifying the North and South; if taking down the tower speeds that up, you've done your job. It's got everyone under its spell—people on the mainland and the US Army. The Union seems untouchable because of the image it creates. Powerful and insubstantial. That's why you're knocking it down."

"You've got that all figured out. You always did have a brilliant mind."

"Please stop." Takuya stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. "Mr. Okabe, say you'll let me join Uilta now. Please?"

"Don't do it." Okabe drained his sake cup. "You're already too involved as it is. And do you even understand what it means? Being active with us means giving up all hope of normal life. Worst-case scenario, you could spend the rest of your years skulking around in the darkness."

"I know that. I'm asking you anyway."

“I’m telling you this for your own good. Forget everything you’ve heard, straighten up, and become a consultant or something.”

“No way. I can’t do that. If you won’t let me in, then I’ll leak everything I just heard to Public Safety—”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence before he’d been hauled up by his shirtfront and shoved back against the wall. Two wooden stools fell over. On the other side of the counter, the old proprietor didn’t wake up. Maybe she’d intentionally decided not to.

“I don’t think you understand what you just said.”

His voice was so low it was almost a whisper, but it packed the force of a physical blow. From inside the pocket of his jacket, Okabe pressed something hard into Takuya’s stomach. Takuya realized just how peaceful his life had been until now. He was just a spoiled, naive kid.

Takuya could feel himself shaking. He tried to speak and heard himself stammering until he managed to get the words out. “I still want to do it. I want to be the one who does it, no matter what it takes. I’m angry. I hate that it’s still standing there. I hate that I have to keep looking at it. And that feeling will be holding me down as long as it’s still there. Nothing will change.”

“...”

Okabe held him there, half-suspended, and for a little while, neither of them moved. All Takuya heard was his own ragged breathing.

Okabe’s hands relaxed on Takuya’s shirt. Before Takuya could catch his breath, the man took the handgun out of his pocket and pressed it into his hand.

“Hang on to this.”

It was heavy, and the weight of it seemed to wake him up. Okabe took a handful of spare bullets out of another pocket and poured them into the pocket of Takuya’s jacket.

“Find somewhere and practice. Don’t get any ideas about trying to hit anything. Just get yourself used to the weight and the recoil. Don’t drop it and

don't hit anybody on your side."

The sensation in his hand was hard and cold. Takuya shivered.

He found the dry riverbed when he was driving down Route 4. He stopped the car and went down to it; the steel bridge for the Tohoku Main Line ran overhead. He went under the bridge, and when he looked up, he could see the sky through the gaps in the rails. The bridge seemed as though it might come falling down if a train went over it.

He scanned the riverbed from right to left. There was a soccer field a little ways away, but no goal posts. He could see a few people on it, here and there, but there was no real reason to sneak around. Takuya stepped out from under the bridge into the sunset light.

Across the river, in the distant sky, he could see the tower.

On reflex, his eyes narrowed—or it might have been more accurate to say that his expression hardened.

He lit a cigarette and waited. He kept going through them faster year by year. And every year, his environment became harder to smoke in. If he'd been able to smoke in the lab, his efficiency would probably have gone up by about 20 percent, but...

When his fifth cigarette was nearly ashes, the sound of a railroad crossing signal reached him from far away.

He tossed the butt and put a hand into his pocket. He felt hard, cold steel. Taking two or three steps forward, he pulled out the gun, disengaged the safety, and racked the slide. He didn't especially care if anyone was watching.

He faced the tower, pointing the gun straight at it.

The train came. When the noise had gotten loud enough, he pulled the trigger. The gun kicked in his hands, and he tightened his grip, keeping it under control.

He shot again. And again and again.

Cartridge cases jumped from the chamber, and he felt fine cinders on his cheeks from the gunpowder. The steel bucked in his hands. The acrid smell

intoxicated him.

When the train had passed, he let his hands fall to hang limply.

No one had noticed. Even if they had, no one would ever think it was a real gun. The idea made him sick, and so did any thought of the person he'd been until the day before.

When Takuya put away the gun and turned on his heel, both his eyes and his heart were hard and cold.

11

"I was at the top of a tower—a cold, hard, strange, twisted tower."

There was a forest of them, and they looked like the ruins of a fallen civilization. They'd half crumbled, eroded by the wind, their ceilings gone. At the top of one of them, Sayuri was hugging her knees.

"The wind up there was cold and deep, like it came from a distant world. The air smelled like it wasn't from this universe," she murmured a little at a time. She was speaking to someone, some imaginary companion she'd created inside herself. If she didn't, she'd never last.

The opaque surface of the sky looked rough, as if it had been scraped with pumice. The wind wasn't unpleasant, but something about it felt wrong.

She could sense noise, too high to hear at first until it finally dropped low enough for human ears. It was a metallic whine from somewhere in the sky. Realizing it was the sound of a distant jet, Sayuri gave a small cry. She looked up.

She stood.

And the tower vanished.

The view changed. Now she was standing in the center of the athletic field of a concrete school somewhere. The school was in ruins. Weeds grew thickly on the ground. All the tiles were cracked and broken, and so were the walls of the school building. It must have been abandoned for at least a decade.

Sayuri looked around, dazed. She could see a town in the distance, but there were no signs of life in it. Everything had crumbled.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed red light.

It was a gentle red, like fire or a sunset. That light was coming from a classroom on the third floor of the school.

Several white doves had gathered at the window of the red classroom.

Living things.

Life, when everything else was dead.

Warmth.

Desperate to get close, Sayuri broke into a run.

There wasn't a single pair of shoes in the main entrance, and dust had settled over it. She stepped into the corridor without taking off her shoes. She stopped and looked around.

Stairs.

She ran up, right past the second floor to the third, and emerged into a perfectly straight hallway. Sayuri held her own, running down it.

In front of a classroom with a sign that read YEAR 3, CLASS 3, she stopped, hesitating for a moment. Warm light filtered out.

Then she flung open the sliding door.

The source of the warm light was a desk by the window.

The shining desk was the only one there; all the others had been pushed away from it. It was surrounded by a completely empty space, as though the other desks were avoiding it, shunning it.

The sight was sad, and yet she felt a sort of kinship with it.

She took a step into the classroom, and the light disappeared as abruptly as a candle being blown out.

As if it had avoided her.

She would never be allowed near warmth again...

She could tell her face was crumpling.

Unable to give up entirely, she slowly stepped forward. Through the window, she could see the skyscrapers of Shinjuku, now in ruins. It looked as if there'd been a war. She touched the lonely desk, its light gone dark. It was completely cold.

She leaned against the wall by the window, then slid down into a crouch. The lonely desk was right in front of her. She hugged herself.

"Why am I here...? Somebody... Please, somebody, anybody..." She hid her face. "Takuya... Hiroki..."

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she was back on top of the tower. She couldn't hear the jet anymore. Only the wind.

In the distance, the white, inorganic Union tower was hazy.

From time to time—depending on the wind—she could see that tower beyond the clouds from here.

*

The authoritative *clack-clack* of chalk woke me up. Apparently, I'd lost to the sandman during class and drifted off for a bit. The sound of writing on the blackboard echoed impassively in the still air.

That dream again...

I'd seen Sayuri wandering again and again. She often roamed through the landscapes of the destroyed city. She was searching for something.

Year three, class three. That was my classroom.

I glanced at the window. All I had to do was shift my gaze a bit, and I could see the scenery outside.

That red desk was my desk...

The weather was clear. A wind blew in, and the thin curtain rippled. Days like this were depressing. Over the course of my three years living here, I'd grown more and more aware of it. When the wind blew like this—

Fortunately, this window didn't face that direction, but still. If it had, I know what I would have seen outside.

When I opened my mailbox, there was another letter. Only one person ever sent me letters. I climbed the narrow wooden stairs, returning to my room, and tossed the letter onto the low table. I put on the headphones that had been lying on the floor, closed my eyes, and played the violin. I carefully avoided looking at the envelope.

I spent about an hour like that, trying to clear my mind completely, but then I gave up and opened the envelope. Every time I got one, I promised myself I wouldn't read it, and then I read it anyway. I knew I'd regret it afterward.

I almost knew why I did it, but I was trying hard not to think about it.

For the most part, it was a report on recent events. Aomori was tense, and US soldiers and military vehicles had started showing up all over the place. War with the Union wasn't far off. At the earliest, it would come this year, and even if it didn't, there might be war next year. Either way, Mr. Okabe's opinion was that it might be inevitable if we wanted to reunite North and South Japan. Due to the North-South split, the military had forced many families and friends apart, so they couldn't see each other even when they wanted. Forcing that pain on people was wrong, Mr. Okabe explained in his letter. It was rare for him to volunteer his opinion when no one had asked him.

He wrote that Takuya had become a special researcher at Aomori Army College. His specialty was quantum physics. That came as a surprise. I hadn't expected him to skip over college and just become a researcher like that. Was he just that smart? He'd probably been allowed to skip grades because it was the US Army College. The letter said that the change in environment had wound him up a lot, and it suggested that I get back in touch and give him somebody to talk to. As soon as I finished reading it, I put it back in the envelope, stuck it between the pages of a book, and shoved it into the back of my cheap storage cupboard.

That night, Sayuri was in my dream again.

She was trudging down a street full of muted colors, probably somewhere around Kita-Shinjuku. The narrow street was lined with a mix of shops and houses, but all the buildings were falling apart. The telephone poles leaned, and the wires were warped. Beyond them, in the distance, I could see the crumbling

high-rises. The town was in ruins. There wasn't a single person around, and the solitude left Sayuri in pain.

She stumbled ever forward, looking for someone. But not just anyone would do. She was looking for somebody specific. But who it was, she didn't know for sure; a lock on her mind prevented her from picturing them. She walked around at random, searching, growing more and more exhausted.

I caught the scent of a wind that blew in from the far edge of the universe. Sayuri was endlessly, infinitely alone.

My eyes opened, and I sat up in bed. *That was vivid*, I thought. The sight of Shinjuku in ruins felt very familiar to me. It felt right—and that was frightening. I wondered whether that was the aftermath of a war. Did that mean I wanted war? I didn't think I did, but there was no telling what I wanted deep down.

The smell of the wind in that dream still lingered somewhere. Old, dusty air. The scent stirred up a sense of nostalgia, and it eased my mind quite a bit.

The phone rang.

After listening to it ring three times, I reached for it. Even before I picked up, I knew it was Rika. There weren't many people who called me, so I generally identified them by what time they called. She was the only one who'd call me on a Sunday morning.

"Oh, you're there," Rika said. "Get a cell phone already, sheesh. Just about everyone has one these days."

"No, I'm good," I told her, the way I always did when the topic came up. "Not having one hasn't caused me any problems so far."

"It's caused problems for *me*, okay? I can't get ahold of you. I called you last night, too. Where were you?"

"I didn't go anywhere." I cocked my head, wondering whether the phone had rung last night. "I think I was probably asleep."

"Living alone must so be nice. You get to sleep and wake up whenever you want."

I could vividly picture her sarcastic expression.

“Can we meet up?” she asked.

“Of course we can. You know there’s no supplementary lectures or electives today.”

“So you’ve got nothing to do outside of lectures? Don’t you have any other plans, Fujisawa?”

“Nope,” I said, without giving it much thought.

“Sometimes I just can’t tell: What kind of person are you? If I wasn’t around, how would you end up spending your days off?”

“I’ve never actually thought about it,” I mumbled. “I think I just live, like everybody else.”

She sighed loudly. “Can I go over there?”

“Come after I’m finished cleaning. I think it’ll take me a few more months.”

“There you go again. Wanna come over here, then?”

“Sure. What about your parents, though?”

“They’re never here. Don’t worry about them.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Pick up a gift for your lovely hostess on your way.”

With that, she hung up. I got dressed, walked to Shinjuku Station, and picked up an assortment of fruit jellies at the European sweets shop just outside the station. I boarded the Yamanote Line, got off at Ikebukuro, then walked to her house. *She’s always in a bad mood these days.* We were in our last year of high school, the year we’d take our entrance exams.

Rika was trying to get into a certain women’s college that was famous for its wealthy, well-bred students, and I figured she’d get in for sure. (And later on, she did qualify—and easily.) Still, she’d fallen victim to the prickly exam-season mood, and lately, she was very nervous. She’d called me out of nowhere, after midnight, more than a few times. Whenever she did, I just kept agreeing with her on the other end of the line until morning, letting her know I was listening. That was all she wanted, and it was all I could do.

Her reliance on me felt pretty good. I liked the rapid-fire way she talked and the unconventional way she felt things. Thanks to her, I started to suspect maybe I wasn't actually worthless. You could have said that we complemented each other.

However, recently, I was really spacing out a lot of the time during our conversations. It wasn't her fault; the problem was completely on my end. I was rapidly losing interest in the reality in front of me.

Rika lived in a Western-style detached house on a quiet residential street. It had almost no yard, but that meant the house itself was more spacious. Since it was on a hill road, there was a little flight of ten stone steps from the gate to the front door. It was a nice, neat house.

When I pressed the intercom button, she told me to just walk in. Rika was on the living room sofa, leaning back into it limply. Notebooks, university entrance exam workbooks, textbook guides, and the school's carefully curated practice problem collection were spread out on a big, low table. I set the white hostess gift box on top of it, then sat cross-legged on the floor, facing her. "Drinks are in the fridge," she said listlessly.

I went into the kitchen without asking, made iced coffee for both of us, then brought it back. "Guess it's not going so well."

Rika sat up. "You always just call it like you see it, don't you, Fujisawa?"

"Is that not okay?"

"It's not *not* okay. You do it on purpose, though, right?"

"Not really. Everything I say is boring, because I'm a boring person."

"See, that right there. You say stuff like that, too, even though you know you aren't."

She *was* grumpy today, although that came as no surprise.

Rika abruptly changed the subject. "Listen, have you read 'Flowers for Algernon'?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Sometimes I think, 'I wish I'd just end up like that.'"

“Like what...?”

“I mean, then I would have other things to worry about than exams, you know?”

I understood what she was getting at, and that’s why I couldn’t let her get away with it. “That’s disrespectful.”

“I know that. The thought just occurred to me. I can’t help it; don’t blame me.”

“All right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you think about it, too, Fujisawa? Don’t you ever get so anxious you don’t know what to do? Don’t you start wanting to just give up on everything?”

“About as much as the next guy.”

“You don’t look like it, though.”

“That’s probably because part of me just gives up and stops caring what happens. If I take enough exams, I’ll probably get in somewhere. And if I don’t, it’s not like that would kill me. It’ll work out somehow. Or maybe it won’t, but that won’t matter.”

“It’s terrifying how you can think that way. I mean, I just can’t...” She leaned back into the sofa again. “Come on, come sit here.”

I sat down beside her. “I need a little of your energy, okay?” Rika said. Her head came to rest on my shoulder. One of her pigtails tickled my neck.

The weight of a person’s head doesn’t feel quite like anything else. She was resting on me the weight of her memories and thoughts and emotions; that trust made me a little tense.

For a fraction of a second, I considered putting a hand on her cheek, passing my other hand around her waist, laying her back on the sofa, and taking off her clothes.

If I wanted to, I thought I could probably sleep with her anytime I liked. Of course, that might have been a hugely arrogant assumption, but...I could tell she wouldn’t mind if it happened, and she might have been wishing that it would.

I couldn't work up the desire to do that, though. Some people might call me spineless, but...doing that to her when she was in this emotionally vulnerable state felt wrong somehow. That wasn't the only reason, though. Everything looked hazy to me. I didn't even register Rika as fully real anymore. I didn't say anything about it, but the weakening of reality around me was just a little terrifying. This wasn't how life was supposed to feel...

It really was bizarre. When I was with her, it wasn't as though her short, swaying skirt and her slim legs and her white cleavage didn't do anything for me. And yet that impulse always got summarily scattered by the frosted glass between me and the world.

Deciding to get lunch, we left the house and boarded the Yamanote Line. Rika said it was kind of far, but there was a Western-style restaurant in Kanda that she wanted to go to. When we went outside, Rika's color visibly improved. Spending most of her time alone in that big house, battling exam pressures, was bound to be taxing.

At the restaurant she'd had in mind, she ordered spaghetti with porcini mushrooms, and I had an omelet and fried foods set meal. The food there was really good.

After that, we decided to take the Chuo Line into Shinjuku. The train was empty, and we got a full row of seats all to ourselves. Rika read my palm and predicted a long life for me, but not wealth. That sounded about right. I was drifting through my life in this nebulous world.

Just then, I saw something.

It was through the window, outside the train. We were stopped at Ochanomizu Station, and there was a platform out there. I'd seen something on the platform for the line that went the opposite way.

The haze covering the world blew away. Just for a moment, my vision grew sharp and clear, and I reflexively leaped to my feet. I sprinted for the train doors.

That's—

It's Sayuri!

I'd seen Sayuri.

The doors were closing. The gap would be too small to slip through.

Without hesitating, I shoved my elbow in between the doors, then tried to pry them open with brute force. I wasn't enough to budge the train doors, but the sensor responded, the compressor hissed, and they opened for me. I dashed out onto the platform.

I stared at the platform on the other side of the tracks.

She wasn't there.

I'd lost sight of her.

A station employee came over and said something to me, but I wasn't listening. I ran up the stairs, then down, and then over to the spot where Sayuri had been. I remembered to keep an eye on the people around me so we wouldn't pass each other by accident.

I walked from one end of the platform to the other. I stared at the people streaming through the ticket gate, coming and going. I stubbornly waited for about thirty minutes. Sayuri wasn't there.

As I was walking around, for a little while, I thought I caught the faint scent of old air, but it might have been my imagination.

And then I remembered Rika. I'd just left her without a word. I dived for the public telephone on the platform, called her cell, and hastily made excuses. I told her I thought I'd seen an old friend that I hadn't been able to contact in ages, and I'd dashed out before I knew what I was doing.

She told me it was fine. "Yeah. It happens."

On the other end of the line, she might have been crying.

12

Winter came again, my third in Tokyo.

School was more exam-obsessed than ever. Like the last sprint at the end of a run, everyone around me attended the special extracurricular lectures. I was on

the science track, so practical classes were important, and I attended as many as I could. However, eight or nine hours of class in one day built up a lot of fatigue, and sometimes I'd fall asleep while taking notes.

At home and at school, I often dreamed about Sayuri.

To be accurate, I dreamed I was wandering around looking for her. I ran through ruined streets, looking around restlessly. Every so often, I thought I caught a glimpse of Sayuri's hair or the hem of her clothes as she turned a corner, but whenever I looked, no one was there.

Finally, I reached the decaying high school. I was sure Sayuri was there. I could feel her presence; I could smell a different universe. I knew she was somewhere cold and lonely. When I looked up, sunset-colored light was filtering through a classroom window.

I ran into my own classroom.

My desk was glowing with red light.

The light promptly disappeared, and that sense of her presence and everything else vanished with it. I stood there, transfixed, panting for breath.

Those were my dreams.

Sayuri was calling.

I was looking for Sayuri, and she was looking for me. I was sure of it. From a rational perspective, this was a dangerous mental state. Still, I didn't think it was strange. It was only natural that we'd look for each other. When Sayuri's presence vanished in the dream, my heart felt like it was tearing apart.

The days passed as though I was holding my breath in cold, deep water. As though the world had left me behind.

I woke to the sensation of someone ruffling my hair.

"Class is over." Rika, who'd been taking a different supplementary lecture in another classroom, had come to pick me up. "Tired?"

"Yeah. Haven't really been sleeping lately."

"Huh. Kind of a relief to hear you get that way sometimes, too, Fujisawa."

“Of course I do. I’m not a cow.”

As I escorted Rika home, we decided to walk toward Ikebukuro for a while.

When we left the ticket gate at Ikebukuro Station, we leaned on the guardrail and talked and avoided the topic of exams as much as possible. We listened to the title track of a new album I’d copied to my music player, each of us using one earbud. Rika closed her eyes, swaying lightly to the rhythm.

Maybe the clear winter air was why I noticed it.

I could see the tower in the north.

It had come out of nowhere today. I usually steeled myself first so the impact didn’t hurt as much, but today was a solid hit. It was as if a transparent bullet had come flying at me. I was being overtaken by dark feelings, and I struggled to pull myself together before Rika noticed.

As she lightly went through a crossing for the Metro Streetcar Arakawa Line, Rika asked me a question.

“You’ll be going to college here, right, Fujisawa? Are you going to move back home once you graduate?”

“No... I’m not planning on it.”

“Hmm. That’s too bad.”

“Why?”

“I want to see where you were born and raised. Maybe try living there,” she casually commented out of the blue, and I panicked a little.

“There’s nothing there,” I answered carefully. “Just ocean and mountains and farm fields. You’d have to get a car. The transportation system is one single-track local line, and everybody who lives in the area uses it. Up there, you might get to know someone from seeing them on the train, even if you don’t know their name. You’d probably get culture shock.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

“No, you’re just romanticizing it,” I said, laughing. “Time passes about twice as slowly there. Give it two or three days, and you’ll be saying you’ve had enough.”

“I’ve had enough of this, so I bet I’d be fine. The thing is, I really don’t want to live in a place like Tokyo forever. It’s busy and noisy, and everything’s so nebulous. It’s like there’s nothing definite here. Like the longer you stay here, the less solid you feel... Have you ever felt that?”

“Hmm. That’s a good question.” I avoided making a clear statement.

“I was born and raised inside the Yamanote loop, so I don’t have a hometown. It sucks, y’know?”

“No, I don’t. Why?”

“I mean, you’ve got nowhere to go. When it comes right down to it, and I tell myself, ‘Okay, I’m gonna go somewhere else,’ I don’t have any specific place in mind. In the end, my only option is to stay here, live here. No hope of anything else.”

Despite the gravity of what she was saying, Rika was using the same tone she did when she was telling a joke. Her words sunk in even more deeply.

“Do you get the urge to go somewhere else a lot?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you know?”

“I didn’t. I had no idea.”

“Tell me more about where you lived, Fujisawa.”

“Let’s see...” I spoke indifferently so as not to stir up any real emotions. “It’s pretty much the northern edge of Japan. It gets a ton of snow. This time of year, everything’s buried in it. If you want to go outside, you have to shovel the snow in front of your house every day. It’s cold, of course. And silent. The snow absorbs sound.”

“That sounds pretty nice.”

“I lived in a place called Minmaya...”

“Minmaya?”

“Right. It’s written with the characters for *three stables*. There’s a fairly famous temple nearby called Gikei-ji that’s dedicated to Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Legend has it that when Yoshitsune fled there, pursued by

Yoritomo's soldiers, Heaven sent him three fine horses to help him escape. That's why it's called Minmaya. In the legend, those horses flew, and Yoshitsune rode them across to Hokkaido and survived..." I wasn't able to finish the whole sentence. "Well, that's about the size of it."

"That's so cool."

We'd been walking as we talked, and that was when we stopped at a closed railroad crossing. A long, long freight train rolled slowly past us.

The train was carrying Type 90 tanks. More than ten of them passed right in front of us. They were probably headed north on the Tohoku Main Line. War really was just around the corner.

"These tanks are going to your hometown, right, Fujisawa?"

"Yeah, that's right," I managed, barely.

"Say, these things move really slowly. Doesn't it look like we could just jump on? Want to steal a ride to Aomori together?"

I tried to smile and felt my face twist.

I finally couldn't take it anymore. I covered my mouth with my hand, looking down. Something was working its way up, and I desperately tried to shove it back.

I swallowed and held my breath; little by little, the calm returned. Trying to make myself breathe normally again, I straightened up.

The tower seemed to leap out at me.

In the red sunset, it felt unbelievably close.

Slowly, the tower's aura leaned over me.

Claiming I wasn't feeling well, I went back to Nishi-Shinjuku alone. There was an iron fence on the way home, and I let my fingers run along it as I walked, making noise. When I got back to my lodgings, there was another letter from Mr. Okabe in my mailbox. I picked it up and headed for my room. I couldn't possibly open it now. I closed the door behind me, returning to the gloomy space that was mine to be alone in, let my bag slip off my shoulder and fall to the floor, then leaned against the door and slowly slid down it into a crouch.

I hurt all over, as if all the bones in my body were poking through my skin. The source was in my heart; why was I feeling it in my body?

When had this feeling come to be inside me?

By the time I'd found the strength to stand again, it was already dark outside. I took off my school uniform, changed into a sweater and jeans, then sat on the floor and leaned against the edge of the bed.

I put on my headphones, closed my eyes, and played my muted violin. It was calming, the way the sounds I played were for my ears alone. Like creating a convection current in my mind to repair me on the inside.

I played with single-minded focus—all the songs I knew, in order.

Somewhere along the way, I found myself playing over and over again the melody Sayuri had performed for me once. By now, that song was exclusively mine, played by me for me alone to hear. I didn't intend to share it with anyone else.

Quite a long time passed that way, I think. My neck and arms had gotten stiff, so I put down the violin and sighed with relief.

From the shared area beyond the door, I heard a sound and sensed that someone was out there. The wooden door was thin and poorly fitted, and at some point, it had come open.

Rika was standing under the light of the dim, worn-out fluorescent bulbs. She'd changed into her street clothes.

Her fingers were pressed to her lips. Her eyes were wide, and she looked startled. She wasn't crying, but she looked ready to.

"Um, I—I was worried, so..."

I went to the door and spoke to her very gently. "What's the matter?"

Rika faltered. "The door was open... You were by yourself, and I was watching you. I got really scared..."

"Scared?" I asked.

"Fujisawa, you looked...awful. Are you always like that when you're at

home...?”

I reached out to softly touch her elbow. “You’ll catch a cold standing out there. Come in.”

“No.” She backed away from me. “I mean, you don’t actually want me in there.”

Silently, I lowered my outstretched hand. “That’s not true,” I said.

“Liar.”

What in the world is this? I thought. What an insane leap... The problem was that she was entirely correct.

“Why are you like this, Fujisawa? Why are you all alone? I’m here, but you’re still...”

“...If you’re going home, I’ll walk you back.”

“Don’t.”

“It’s dark around here, and the neighborhood’s not all that safe.”

“No!”

She turned on her heel and left, almost running. Wordlessly, I listened to her footsteps going down the stairs.

For a little while, I just stood there.

I didn’t want to be inside anymore. I picked up my jacket, put it on, locked the door, and went out. The cold winter air soothed the pain inside me as I wandered aimlessly through the old, dingy residential district around the dorm.

Maybe because there were a lot of old wooden houses, there was usually reconstruction going on somewhere in the neighborhood. While I wasn’t paying attention, another house had been knocked down and turned into a vacant lot. The high pile of debris hadn’t been carted away yet; there was a chain-link fence around the property.

With the house that had been there gone, there was nothing to block the distant view. Through the fence, I could see the high-rises of Nishi-Shinjuku straight ahead. Green buildings and luxury hotels shone in the darkness, using

exorbitant amounts of energy. There were lights in almost all the windows. I thought it was a beautiful view. Irritating, but beautiful.

This fence is in the way, though.

Suddenly, a current of intense emotion ran through me. I grabbed the fence.

What the hell?

Why is this thing even here? That's why everyone leaves me behind. I'm all alone because of this stupid thing. Why do I always have to be cut off from everything? Why can't I go over there? I shook the fence violently until it rattled, swaying backward and forward. I hit it with my fist. *This thing is why I can't stay close to Rika.*

I knew the answer, though. The fence that separated me from the world hadn't been imposed on me from the outside. It wasn't out there at all; it was inside me. The world hadn't shut me out; I was shutting out the world. I was the one who was shutting out Rika. This city was trying to include me, and Rika had wanted to accept me.

I was just rejecting them.

The Velaciela.

I thought of the white airplane and its power to overcome boundaries. If I wanted the ability to leap over this fence, I would find it there. I'd poured all my power into it. When I'd decided not to fly it, I'd locked myself away in a little box.

I knew I'd made a fatal mistake. I should have flown that plane, no matter what it took. I'd poured into the Velaciela everything I'd need in order to live my life, and then I'd thrown it away.

Snow began to fall.

13

It would be snowing outside. To preserve confidentiality, though, the Aomori Army College had no windows, so anyone in the grad students' room at the Tomisawa Lab would have no idea.

Takuya and Maki were the only ones in the room. Takuya lived a good distance away, so he often stayed at the college overnight. The lab had a proper nap room and shower, so it was decent place to stay for a few days if he needed to. Maki lived nearby, so she always stayed at the school until late. There were hints that she was intentionally making sure her hours lined up with Takuya's, but Takuya politely acted as though he hadn't noticed.

When Tomisawa stopped by the grad students' room, Takuya was making coffee in the attached kitchenette.

"Maki, they've decided to transport the patient. I imagine they'll be running you off your feet with odd jobs, but do help us out."

"Oh, really? Congratulations," Maki said cheerfully.

"I tell you, ever since the mainland laboratory kept butting in and being a nuisance, it took us all of half a year after we discovered her to get her transferred up here. It's awful, bringing such an important test subject into such an unstable environment." Even as Tomisawa complained, his tone stayed light. "Still, this may precipitate some rapid developments in the tower research as well."

Takuya poked his head out of the kitchenette. "Um, what patient is that?"

When Tomisawa noticed Takuya was there, a bit of consternation entered his expression, although Takuya didn't understand why.

"Oh, hey there, Shirakawa... It's the Sleeping Beauty."

"The Sleeping...?"

"She's a special narcolepsy patient. I told you about the 1996-type variant narcolepsy before, remember?" Maki said. "She's amazing. Her brain waves wouldn't be possible in a normal human. Even better, the changes in them are linked so closely to the activity of the tower that it can't be coincidence."

"Huh..."

"We found her in Tokyo in early autumn," Tomisawa said. "It's been nearly three years since the onset of her illness; she hasn't woken once during that time. When we compared the records of her brain waves with records of the

tower's activity, I got chills. We may need to install some sort of shielding on our experimental facility as well..."

"That's an incredible find. I hadn't heard anything about that," Takuya said.

"Well, of course not. Maki's brain science team is in charge of this one. I'll be in Tokyo again for a while to take care of the procedures." Then he turned to Maki. "I hate to ask, but could you handle the preparations for the neurological ICU?"

"Yes, sir," Maki responded.

In his pocket, Takuya's cell vibrated.

He checked and saw a text from Okabe. He wasn't asking anything in particular; he was just asking how things had been lately. However, this was a code that signaled it was time to meet up.

"Oh, is that Mr. Okabe?"

Maki had leaned in to peek at the phone's screen, and she sounded a little relieved.

"Is Oka doing well these days, Shirakawa?" Tomisawa asked suddenly, and Takuya looked up in spite of himself.

"You know Mr. Okabe?"

"I certainly do; we go back quite a ways. I happened to run into him in Tokyo in September. He stopped by to poke fun at the research findings report."

"Huh..."

"We were classmates in high school, actually."

"You go that far back?"

"Yep." Tomisawa gave a meaningful smile. "When you get to be this age, friends like that are valuable. Or maybe it has nothing to do with age at all..."

The predawn ocean had a clinging, penetrating chill about it. Even in March, the weather in the Tsugaru region showed no sign of relenting.

Takuya was in a fishing boat out on the Tsugaru Strait, with Okabe and three Emishi factory employees. The entire staff of Emishi Manufacturing belonged to

the terrorist organization Uilta. The five of them sat in the cabin, listening to the ceaseless noise of the engine. The only one who was noticeably tense was Takuya. He kept lacing his fingers together, then releasing them.

The fishing boat was about to land on Cape Shirakami, the southernmost tip of Union territory.

This is Ezo.

Hokkaido...

His hands were sweating.

The fishing boat had dropped anchor at the dock on the cape.

"I dreamed of coming to Ezo someday. I had no idea it would happen this easily," Takuya said, out on deck.

Satou took a sip from his can of coffee. It was ice-cold from the chill air. "Yeah, but this is just the southern tip. Do you have family in the Union?"

"No, it's not that."

"Right. Your generation was born after the split."

Satou got to his feet and looked in the direction of where Honshu lay, invisible in the darkness.

"The Union's technologically advanced, after all. I get why you'd wanna go there. The president got separated from his family due to the North-South split, so I think he probably feels a bit differently about it."

"What? He did?"

"Sure did. He hasn't even been able to talk to his wife for over twenty years."

"Mr. Okabe..."

Takuya looked at the luxury car that was stopped in a corner of the port. It was a good distance away, so he couldn't make him out that well, but Okabe was slouched in the back seat, illuminated by the car's small interior light. He was having a confidential conversation with the man next to him, a soldier in the Union military uniform and a Russian hat. The soldier was a member of the intelligence department—and a Uilta collaborator. They were talking about

securing a route for an air invasion of the Union.

“I didn’t expect that, though,” Satou said suddenly.

“Expect what?”

“That the president would get you involved in this.”

“I forced him to. I told him if he didn’t let me help, I’d tip off Public Safety.”

“Geez, kid. That was a damn risky move...” Satou gave Takuya a startled look. Naturally, what Takuya had risked was his life.

Just then—

Three dry, staccato sounds rang out in rapid succession.

Goose bumps broke out all over his back, and only then did he recognize the noises as gunshots.

Takuya and Satou reacted simultaneously, diving into the boat. The employee in the pilothouse began preparing to leave port.

A spiderweb of cracks ran across the sedan’s windshield. The only reason the damage wasn’t worse was because the glass was bulletproof. The driver rapidly backed the car up, bracing for more bullets. As the car entered the shadow of a warehouse, Okabe jumped out of the back seat and sprinted toward the boat.

The gunshots pursued him.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

A bullet grazed Okabe’s arm and left a cut behind, but he kept running. The intelligence department’s sedan fled in a different direction, and a large vehicle followed. They heard a grenade being launched, and an explosion erupted right in the middle of the warehouse street. Deep-red flames went up, mixed with the smoke peculiar to a gasoline fire. In almost the same moment as the explosion, Okabe jumped onto the fishing boat.

“That officer was a damned idiot. They figured out he was the one who sold ’em... Get us outta here!”

At Okabe’s order, the fishing boat immediately pulled out of port. Having disposed of the sedan, the attackers were driving their way again. The boat

took a hail of machine-gun bullets, but the crew had all taken refuge in the cabin while the vessel raced south at full speed. Shots from a stubborn semiautomatic at the dock echoed vainly over the water without hitting anything.

“This trip got a bit dicey, huh?” As he spoke, Miyagawa was bandaging Okabe with practiced hands.

“At least now we’ve got the air invasion nailed down,” Okabe said to Takuya. “That means it was worth coming out here. Right?”

Takuya was about to answer when a warning from the pilothouse interrupted him. “Boss! There’s a ship! A patrol boat!”

“What?!”

Okabe stomped into the pilothouse and looked out over the water. A military ship had come up and was sailing level with the fishing boat. An alarm sounded, and a warning was issued in Russian. Even if they didn’t understand the language, the meaning was obvious. The white patrol ship was several times bigger than the fishing boat, like an adult to a child, and the ship was fast.

Okabe clicked his tongue in irritation. “Dammit. Now that there’s gonna be a war, they finally decide to do their job. Shake ’em off!”

“Yessir!” the employee shouted from the helm, as if to boost his own morale.

“Hold out for another three minutes, until we hit the border. Satou! Miyagawa! Get to the guns!”

Before Satou and Miyagawa could prepare to attack, the patrol ship’s single-mounted gun spat fire.

The heavy bass noise seemed as if it might tip the fishing boat from the sound waves alone, and the shell blasted a hole in the side of the boat. It wasn’t anything as courteous as a warning shot. After it came a machine-gun volley.

The rain of bullets punched through the wooden boat like the hull was made of paper and ricocheted around the cabin, too fast to see. Takuya screamed and dropped into a crouch.

Suddenly, his vision went black.

He thought the lights had gone out, but that wasn't it. Numbness came, then changed to cold, then pain. It felt as if his left arm had been blown off, but although his vision was dim, it was enough to show him that his hand was still attached. Apparently, either a ricochet of a bullet or a fragment of the shattered ship had pierced his upper arm. The space between his back and the wall was slimy with liquid. His blood-soaked clothes felt disgusting... Outside, machine-gun fire still rang out, the sound reminding him of a construction site. As if it was echoing from another world.

Somebody called his name.

"Are you okay?" they yelled.

Who is that?

He thought it was Okabe's deep voice, but maybe it wasn't.

He felt himself slip down until he was lying on the floor. That attack had taken off most of the roof. In the center of his narrowing field of vision, he saw the first signs of dawn. The dark sky was faintly red. The sun hadn't yet climbed above the horizon.

High in the sky, no bigger than a grain of sand, a white seabird flew.

"Dammit, you've got no right to fly..."

At that point, he blacked out.

14

At first, she thought it was a bird. A pure-white figure flying across the cloudless, faded sky. A sign of life. Sayuri stood up. When she looked closer, she saw that it wasn't a bird.

It was a plane.

A white airplane.

"Those wings... I know them."

She broke into a run.

The moment she started running, the landscape around her changed. The

unglazed pottery towers vanished, and she was running through a ruined city—Tokyo. It was deserted now, and the buildings had all crumbled away.

“Wait! Velaciela!”

Sayuri had eyes only for the airplane. I was experiencing the same things, though, and what my eyes were drawn to was the town. It was so familiar, even in ruins. I’d walked through here often over the past three years.

No matter how long she ran, Sayuri never got out of breath. But little by little, her body grew heavier. The weight started with her extremities, as if they were slowly turning into metal. Only her face was constantly turned toward the sky, and her body seemed to drag behind it. I shared the sensation with her.

The Velaciela began to wheel, perhaps waiting for Sayuri to catch up to it.

She stopped and stood still.

The scenery changed again.

The wind died. The next thing she knew, she was surrounded by a cream-colored floor and walls. It was a hard, cold, and lifeless hospital room.

It was unusually large, maybe enough to accommodate six patients, but it was very nearly empty. There was just one bed, by the window. Beside it sat a monitor that checked vital signs and several other pieces of medical equipment, beeping at regular intervals.

When she saw what lay on the bed, Sayuri was aghast.

It was...

...Sayuri herself.

She was terribly thin, and her hair was quite a bit longer. Still, it was her own body.

Her body was sleeping.

Timidly, with her hand still covering her mouth, she went closer.

The chest barely rose and fell, and she couldn’t hear any breath, so she wasn’t sure if it was breathing at all. The only indication that it was alive were the sounds from the monitor.

My face, Sayuri thought. It was a little more grown-up than the face she thought of as her own.

She stood by the bed, staring down at her sleeping body. Even she didn't know how much time she had spent like this. She'd lost all sense of time. It might have been a moment, or it could have been several years.

She heard the heavy sliding door open.

Three men dressed in black wheeled in a stretcher from the hallway. They didn't notice Sayuri.

They unhooked the medical equipment from Sayuri's body, then solemnly transferred it to the stretcher.

While they were working, a man in a gray suit came in. It was impossible to tell how old he was, but he wasn't young. He was also very gaunt. He watched the work from a distance. It wasn't until much, much later that I learned the man was Professor Tomisawa.

The casters squeaked as Sayuri's body was wheeled away. She had been able to do nothing but watch the scene play out.

Just before he left the room, Tomisawa glanced back and gazed steadily at us.

Sayuri tensed.

For a little while, time stopped.

Tomisawa finally left.

With an unfeeling sound, the heavy door closed, shutting out the noises and artificial light from the hall.

The walls and floor and ceiling were cold.

This time, there really were no living things there. Nothing was moving at all in this box.

Once again, she was all alone.

*

"What...was that dream...?" I murmured as I sat up. The gas heater was turned up too high, and it was sizzling. I'd been studying for entrance exams,

and somewhere in there I'd slumped over the low table and fallen asleep. It was already light outside.

The Velaciela.

A hospital.

And close to her, myself. In the dream, I had been Sayuri. No... That wasn't quite accurate. In that place, I'd been a shapeless sensation hovering incredibly close to Sayuri's eyes, a perspective that was able to feel things almost as if I were Sayuri.

I couldn't bring myself to think that it was just a dream.

I had practically zero interest in dream-reading or revelations, but something about this one bothered me. My mind wasn't fully functional, since I'd only just woken up, so I opened the window to get more oxygen. Cold, fresh morning air flowed in.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flicker of movement, and my heart skipped a beat. The object had been white, so for a moment I'd associated it with the Velaciela. It was the crumpled, unopened envelope from Mr. Okabe. The air currents had stirred it. I picked it up.

I set it down on the table and gazed at it for a while.

It was the dream that had made me feel like opening it. When I picked up the box cutter, though, my mood got heavier again. I got up, put the kettle on, and made coffee to calm myself down.

When I cut open the envelope, I found a smaller envelope and a note. The note wasn't on the usual stationary; it seemed to be on notebook paper that had been torn along the edge of a ruler. The message was brief. He'd stolen this from a friend, by force. It had been a job and a half. Come thank him in person.

Below that, it said *Hospitalized at:*, followed by the address and hospital name. The National Railways General Hospital in Shibuya. Neurology department.

Hospitalized at?

I checked the smaller envelope. It had a stamp on it, but no postmark; it

hadn't been mailed. It was addressed to Aomori Prefecture, Tsugaru, Ookawadai, Mr. Okabe... Mr. Hiroki Fujisawa, Mr. Takuya Shirakawa...

I had a bad feeling about this, and a chill ran through me.

I turned the envelope over and looked at the sender's name.

I started to sweat.

Hiroki. Takuya. I'm sorry for leaving you without saying anything.

That was how the letter began.

I wanted to spend summer vacation with you; I hate that I couldn't. When I woke up, I was in a hospital in Tokyo, and I've been here ever since. The people at the hospital told me I should cut off all contact with people I've known and focus on my treatment; they said that would be easier on me so I could recover faster. I begged them, though, and so they're letting me write this. The doctors may be right, but giving you an explanation is really important to me.

I'm going to send this to Mr. Okabe so that the two of you can read it together.

I don't really know what I should write, though.

I'm so confused.

The doctors say I'm sick, but I just can't get used to the idea. When I wake up in the hospital, the doctors come running; maybe they can tell from the machines. They say I'm sick because my sleep is "broken." So when I wake up, everyone is surprised. Apparently, once I fall asleep, I stay asleep for weeks or months.

I have the same dream, over and over.

I'm all by myself in this empty, deserted universe. I'm so lonely it hurts—in my fingers and cheeks, my nails and heels, even the tips of my hair.

That place where the three of us were together is already starting to seem like a dear, unreachable memory to me.

It was so warm—but now it feels like a dream. So does the time we spent together.

It's getting harder for me to tell what's a dream and what isn't. Things like the color of the walls in the hospital room and the view of the garden from my window feel somehow indistinct. Sometimes I think I might be the one who's a dream. I'm not really sure if the person I am actually exists.

But when I have doubts, I remember that station, up on the mountain.

It's the only thing I want to remember. I'm sure that was the only time in my whole life I was ever happy.

The times I spend asleep seem to be getting longer and longer. I don't know when I'll wake up next. I may never wake up again.

Still, as long as I don't lose that memory of the time the three of us spent together, I think that tiny thread can still keep me connected to reality. I'm not sure I even know what "reality" is, but to me, it means the two of you.

Hiroki, Takuya. Did your beautiful white plane—

I closed my eyes. I wanted to stop reading... But I knew I couldn't do that.

—make it safely across the ocean to that tower?

It was dated three winters earlier. When I finished reading it, I drank my coffee. Then I read it through again, from the beginning. I was too keyed up, and I had to read it a third time before I understood it.

When I finally absorbed what the letter said, I changed clothes, put on my jacket, and left the apartment. I walked the fenced hill road along the canal, intently conscious of every single step, then climbed the curving set of stone stairs. I boarded the Yamanote Line from Shinjuku Station. Once I was sitting down, I took out the letter and read it again.

I'm so lonely it hurts—in my fingers and cheeks, my nails and heels, even the tips of my hair.

That single sentence struck right to my core, and I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was as if she'd put my own feelings into words. I was lonely. Here, in this city of more than thirty million people, I was desperately lonely.

It didn't take long to reach Shibuya Station. From there, the National Railways General Hospital was a fifteen-minute bus ride away. I walked through the large

front garden, entered the building, found a hospital floor map, and examined it closely. The neurology department was on the sixth floor. I got into an elevator.

Visiting hours began in the afternoon, but I asked at the front desk anyway.

“Sayuri Sawatari has been transferred to another hospital.”

The nurse answered me immediately, without checking any documents.

“Transferred?” I gripped the counter impatiently.

“Yes, a week ago. If you’d like more information, please ask the hospital she was transferred to. Let’s see...”

I didn’t have a notebook or anything to write with, so I asked her to copy the information down onto a piece of notepad paper for me. I thanked her, took it, then had a sudden thought and asked her one more question.

“Um, the room Miss Sawatari was in... Would it be okay if I saw it?”

The hallway on the neurology department’s floor was dimly lit, and the floor was very cold. It was as if that tension peculiar to hospitals had been concentrated into its purest form here. Did brains and nerves need the dark and the cold? I walked through the halls, before the doctors made their rounds, until I found the room I’d been told about.

There was no nameplate next to the door. It was heavy, the same color as the walls, and it slid so that it could tightly seal off the room. I set my hand on the rod-shaped handle and gave it a good push to open it.

I entered the room. The door closed automatically under its own weight, and then the room was a square box. The overhead lights weren’t on, so the only light came from the window. It illuminated a single empty bed.

This was definitely Sayuri’s hospital room, the one I’d seen in my dream. Looking around slowly, I crossed to the very center.

Even though the space was completely enclosed, I felt wind—the same wind that was in the dreams. I caught the scent of old air, as if it was blowing in from another world.

I felt the presence of someone—

Did your beautiful white plane—

“Sawatari.”

I murmured the name. In the dream, Sayuri had been here.

—make it safely across the ocean to that tower?

“Sawatari, are you there?”

I reached out into empty space.

Just then—

Everything around me dissolved.

In the blink of an eye, the four walls burned to ash, and I was no longer standing in a hospital. The world around me had been completely rewritten.

I was standing in a vast, grassy plain.

Where the abandoned station was.

Everything was the way I remembered it. The pedestrian bridge, eroded by the wind and rain. The concrete platforms that had been discarded after they were built. The expanse of the sky, the low horizon over the ocean...

A light shock wave swept through, scorching me on its way past. Across the sea, the Union’s tower was blazing red; the flames turned the air around it the color of sunset. The wind blew, and the undergrowth rippled. There was no snow; the ground was a vivid green. It was summer; the wind was alive.

And right in front of me...

There she was.

The one I’d been searching for.

Her long hair streamed...

...and she took my outstretched fingers in hers.

Sayuri was standing there. I could feel her fingers on mine. This wasn’t the usual, insubstantial dream. No, it must have been a dream—but I could feel her there as real as anything. The wind blew, the grass was damp, and I caught the scent of sunset from the far reaches of the sky. Sayuri was there, without a

doubt, just a little ways beyond my fingers.

“I looked for you...,” Sayuri said.

Or maybe I was the one who said it.

“I was all by myself, and...it was so cold, Hiroki...”

“I know,” I said.

She covered her face, sobbing silently.

I gazed at the thinness of her shoulders, the fineness of every strand of her hair, the smallness of her hands.

The sky was the same warm red it had been on the day Sayuri and I had last met.

I could hear cicadas calling.

Sayuri was there, right in front of me.

I could barely breathe, and I sucked air into my lungs again and again. So this is what people mean when they talk about being choked with emotion...

Still, I also understood that this was a dream. Or at least something very similar. The edges of her consciousness and mine had miraculously overlapped here. It was an illusion the two of us happened to be sharing, nothing more.

Despite the knowledge, these few moments intoxicated me. I wanted to stay here with Sayuri at the far edge of the world forever. Maybe it wouldn't be impossible.

But...

There was another way, and that was the one I should choose. My heart ached fiercely.

Slowly, I closed my eyes and opened them again.

When I did, Sayuri and I were standing side by side, up on the pedestrian bridge. This was the spot we'd fallen from.

From there, we could look out over the ocean.

There was mist on the water, so it looked like a sea of clouds, tinted by the

red light from the tower.

The tower was still burning, emitting pale-red flashes from its belly. But it remained standing, calmly, straight and beautiful. Sayuri and I watched it together.

“I’ll go pick you up,” I said. “I want to meet you one more time, the right way. Not here; somewhere that’s clearer. I want to touch you. I want you to touch me. I want my own hands to tell me you’re here. So...”

Sayuri looked at me forlornly.

“I’m going now.”

She said nothing.

I’ll wake up from this dream. Once I’m awake, I know what I have to do.

“Where?” Sayuri’s voice was quiet. “Where are you going to pick me up?”

“Where you are now.” I pointed straight at the tower. “Over there.”

Sayuri and I were linked by a promise.

It was the only thing connecting us.

“Sawatari, this time, I want to keep that promise. I’ll take you to that tower in the Velaciela. Then we can meet again, outside our dreams. Then we can know the other’s there.”

Sayuri was silent.

“I promise.”

I was clenching my hands until they hurt.

Sayuri had been steadily watching me as I spoke, but then she looked down and covered her face. She began to sob like a child, crying aloud, shoulders heaving. She scrubbed at her eyes with her index fingers, over and over, wiping away the tears. In a trembling, faltering voice, she agreed.

“Okay...I promise...”

“Let’s fly to the tower together.”

I had a vision of the white Velaciela flying, just a tiny dot in that deep-red sky.

It looked like a lost seagull. I hoped from the bottom of my heart that that lost bird would safely make it back to its flock.

And then I was standing in the empty hospital room, all alone.

Maybe it was just a daydream. But I could still feel Sayuri's warmth where she'd touched my fingers. That faint sensation heated my whole body. I rubbed my face roughly with my sleeve.

That day, long ago, we made a promise we couldn't keep. Even now, the white tower I'd seen from the grassy plain by the abandoned station shone brilliantly in my soul.

THE TOWER

1

Even in the dream, his forehead was sweaty; it was probably summer. The colors of the world around him looked bleached and faded.

Takuya often realized he was dreaming. In fact, it was safe to say that he always realized. But that was always only at the beginning. Before long, he would sink deep into the mud of his subconscious until his objectivity was gone. Once the dream began to progress, he gradually lost his awareness that it was a dream.

He was standing in a bookstore.

It was the enormous one in the Plaza Building in front of the station, the one that took up half the fourth floor. He was holding technical physics books. By now, the laboratory got all the books and periodicals he needed, and he had almost no use for anything he would find on the street. Thus, what he was doing was impossible. He didn't notice the contradiction.

No, it wasn't, actually. Right now, Takuya realized, he was in his third year of middle school. Instantly, he was absorbed into his fifteen-year-old self, surrounded by a fifteen-year-old world. Once again, his objectivity faded into the dream.

He walked slowly to another shelf and wandered down an aisle between shelves of paperbacks.

He spotted a slender girl ahead. Her slim fingers were taking a book off the shelf.

A little startled, Takuya called to her.

"Sawatari?"

Sayuri turned around.

“...Takuya.”

They left the bookstore and stood together on the Tsugaru Line platform at Aomori Station. They had fifteen minutes left until their train arrived.

There was nothing to talk about, and Takuya was uncomfortable. He kept checking the electronic bulletin board, staring at the iron tracks below the platform, and looking at his own shoes for no reason.

“Um.”

“Hey.”

Unable to stand the silence, they spoke to each other at the same time.

“Sorry, what?”

“Oh, no...,” Sayuri murmured awkwardly.

Silence.

It's weird, he thought. Why is it so unsettling to be with someone and have nothing to talk about? When he was with Hiroki, it was totally fine if they didn't say anything, but...

“The thing is, Hiroki—”

“Hiroki was—”

They'd spoken at the same time again.

Why are we overlapping so much? Of course, Hiroki is about the only topic we have in common...

He heard a little laugh.

“We've never talked much when it's just the two of us, have we?” Sayuri's smile broke some of the tension between them.

“That could be it.” Takuya nodded.

“Hey, Takuya, do you like physics?”

“Huh?”

“You bought some books about it.”

“Oh. Yeah, I do.”

“That’s amazing...”

“What is?”

“Physics is only a few steps away from magic. You know, my grandpa was a physicist, too.”

“Wow...” He was genuinely impressed. “That’s *actually* amazing.”

“I don’t think I inherited any of his ability, though. I’ve never even met him.”

“Because of the North-South split?”

“Yeah. He was in Hokkaido.” Families that had been separated during the split tended to avoid using the name “Ezo.” “I wonder if he’s still alive...”

“Oh...”

“Hey, Takuya, are you two still at that job? Is it fun?”

“Hard to say.” He did enjoy earning his own money with his own work, but he downplayed that. “It’s a factory that belongs to this scary old guy, you know. He yells; he works us like dogs...”

“Is he that scary?”

“He’s like a Nebuta ogre. He looks like he’s wearing tough-guy stage makeup, but it’s his regular face.”

“You’re kidding.” Sayuri broke into a smile. “Really?”

“You wanna come see him one of these days?” The invitation just slipped out.

“Huh? Can I?” Sayuri was clearly delighted. “Won’t I be in the way?”

“I’m sure Hiroki will be happy about it, too.” Deep down, he thought Hiroki might not like it at all, but he promptly chased away that thought. Sayuri’s honest emotions made him want to see her smile even more.

“Okay! Then I want to go!”

There was an announcement that the outbound train for Kanita-Minmaya was arriving. Takuya leaned forward, looking where the train would come, the way he always did.

“Hey, Takuya? This may sound kind of strange, so don’t laugh, okay?” Sayuri said all of a sudden.

Takuya turned back to her. “What? I won’t laugh.”

“Okay,” Sayuri said, agreeing without nodding. “Then I’ll tell you. You see...”

The train glided into the platform.

“Tall towers? Like the Union’s tower?”

Takuya asked from his spot in a box seat on the Tsugaru Line train. Sayuri was sitting silently in the seat that faced his, her hands resting on her skirt.

“No.” She shook her head. “The shape is strange, sort of twisted. There are lots of other towers nearby besides the one I’m in.”

“About how many?”

Sayuri thought hard for a moment. “Ten...twenty... More than I can count, maybe. I don’t know. I’m not sure how I know this, but each of them is a different world. All the towers are dreams that universe is seeing.”

Takuya rested his elbow on the windowsill, listening intently. Sayuri gazed out the window at the scenery as she spoke. Or maybe she was watching her own reflection in the glass.

“So this tower is broken and twisted. I’m on top of it, and I look around, but all I can see is a faded sky and all these other towers like trees in a forest, and...”

She broke off for a little while, thinking about what she should say next.

“I can never leave.”

Sayuri’s small fists rested on her small knees.

“I’m always really lonely there all by myself, and then, just when I’m sure my heart is going to fade completely away...”

Sayuri leaned forward and looked at Takuya.

“I see a white airplane in the sky.”

The train went into a tunnel, and the air pressure buffeted the windows. Takuya sat up straight as if he’d been stung. “A white airplane?”

“Yes.”

“And then?”

There were no other passengers in the car. Takuya and Sayuri were the only ones talking. Even the fans fixed to the white ceiling weren't running today, for some reason.

“The dream ends.”

Takuya was quiet. He didn't know how he should take what she'd said. Joking around would be weird, but a somber reaction wouldn't be right, either.

“That dream is lonely, and painful, and difficult. But when I see that airplane, it's such a relief. It feels...warm. Whenever I'm in pain, I think of that white airplane. That's...been happening a lot lately, but I think I'll be okay. Deep down, I know that white airplane is going to fly to me someday, and then everything will work out. It's going to carry me away, and then I won't have to be alone anymore.”

“Listen, I—” Takuya spoke before he thought.

“Hmm?” Sayuri cocked her head, still smiling.

“You need to come visit us at work. I...I've got something I really want to show you.”

*

It's bright, he thought. When his eyes adjusted to the light, the first thing he saw was the ceiling. He didn't have his glasses, so he couldn't see that well. When he tried to move, intense pain shot through his left upper arm. He closed his eyes and waited for it to subside. His whole body was sticky with sweat. The air was hot, and the humidity was high.

“What a dream...”

He moved his head carefully, trying not to trigger any more pain than he had to. He was in an old hospital room. The floor was a wooden one, but the wax had worn off. There was a stand for a tub of antiseptic by his pillow, and a kettle sat on the potbellied stove, hissing. There were two folding chairs. One of them had a handbag sitting on it. He'd seen it somewhere before.

There was condensation on the window. Outside, it was white and cloudy, and snow was falling. Takuya watched the fine white flakes soundlessly drift down.

He heard the door open.

Footsteps came toward him from across the floorboards.

“Oh, good. You’re awake, Shirakawa?”

“Maki.”

Maki Kasahara was wearing a relieved smile. Fine snow clung to her hair. She must have come from outside. “I was worried about you, you know,” she said. “Does your shoulder still hurt?” She shrugged out of her coat and hung it on a chair.

“No... Yes.”

“Excuse me a second.”

Maki approached Takuya’s bed, leaned over him, and set her hand against his forehead. Her palm felt cool and pleasant. The swell of her bosom was right in front of him, and he couldn’t avert his eyes from it. “You’ve got a fever,” she said. She took away her cool hand.

“Do you think you could eat something?” Maki held up a shopping bag. “I bought some fruit. I went and picked up some cake, too.”

“No... Nothing.”

“Really?” She sounded a little disappointed. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Takuya gazed at her white hand, but he finally shook his head wordlessly. He asked a different question instead. “How’s everything at the lab?”

“Oh, right! It’s been crazy.” She spoke rapidly, as though she’d suddenly remembered. “The tower’s activity level suddenly jumped. The whole staff is running all over the place trying to analyze it right now.”

“Huh? You mean...”

“You know, around the tower... The black phase shift circle started to expand

while I was monitoring it. It was terrifying.”

Maki fell silent for a little while.

“Was it that bad?”

“The area around the tower was rewritten into a parallel world, out to a radius of twenty-six kilometers.”

“That’s triple what it was before. Why would it do that so suddenly? ...I want to see the data.” He tried to get up.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Maki stopped him with a soft hand on his shoulder. Takuya lay back on the bed obediently. He felt the urge to take her hand, and he nearly reached for it but managed to stop himself. He was aware of how weak he was right now, and he wanted her to baby him.

“It’s all right. They’ve got a projected end date for the analysis. Once you’re back in shape, you can take your time and look over the report.”

“Tell me what we know now. Please.”

Maki gave him a look, as if she was dealing with a recalcitrant little brother, but she told him without hesitating. “It’s that one patient.”

“That one... Oh, the one Professor Tomisawa went to Tokyo to...”

“Yes, to bring here. Her level of conscious activity rose at the exact same time the tower was active. Basically, she began to wake up. And the more awake she was, the faster the phase shift accelerated. After that, her level of consciousness suddenly started to come down again; she went back to her deep sleep right as the tower’s activity stopped.”

“That’s...” Takuya needed a few seconds to process the phenomenon.

“It’s just as we thought. The patient’s sleep and the tower’s activity are perfectly linked. I didn’t fully believe it before. After what I’ve seen, though, there’s no way to doubt it.”

“Then the patient is acting as the switch that activates the tower...”

“Professor Tomisawa says she’s more like a system suppressing its activity than a switch. You’d think the information the tower receives from parallel

worlds would be released into this world. Instead, he thinks it's being channeled into the subject's brain... Into her dreams."

"Her dreams..."

"I wonder how she's processing the parallel worlds' information as she sleeps. Does she see it as visual images? Either way, if she's taking on that much information, she won't have enough mental-processing capacity to maintain consciousness. Conversely, when she regains consciousness, the parallel worlds will overflow..."

"The tower will go haywire..."

"And the whole world might get overwritten by that black void."

"Then... What about the patient?"

"She'll...just have to stay asleep like that. Forever. Or that's the general consensus. I do feel bad for Miss Sawatari, but..."

Goose bumps ran across his skin.

He stopped breathing.

What did she just say?!

He wanted to speak, but neither his throat nor his lips would move. His thoughts were too compressed for his body to keep up.

Multiple fragments of memory pieced themselves together into a solution, and the vectors of all the information pointed to one conclusion. He understood everything.

He felt his temperature rising. His whole body hurt. He exhaled, and the air from his lungs was hot. "Sawatari?" he breathed.

"Yes, Sayuri Sawatari." Maki sighed sympathetically. "She's your age, I think. She's a very pretty girl..."

He managed to get himself discharged in two days. Driving a car with his left arm in a sling was quite a chore. Once he'd parked in the college's lot, Takuya went straight to the experimental facility's neurological ICU.

All the doors in the brand-new experimental facility had automatic locks that

required card keys. He took off the ID card that hung from his breast pocket by a clip, then swiped it through the card reader beside the door. A small warning buzzer sounded, and the LED lamp changed from green to red. The door didn't open.

He tried again, running the card through slowly from bottom to top. The buzzer sounded. The results were the same.

He heard footsteps. The Aomori Army College's experimental facility had no windows or curtains, so there was nothing to absorb the cold echoes.

"You can't get in with your ID, Shirakawa," said the owner of the footsteps.

It was Professor Tomisawa.

"You're healed up?"

"Oh yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. Um..."

"Maki was terribly worried. I'd thank her if I were you."

"I will."

"Did she tell you about this, then? Do you want to see her?"

Without waiting for a response, Tomisawa took off his own ID card.

With a hiss of compressed air, the thick, heavy automatic door opened smoothly.

The lighting in the special hospital ward was dimmed slightly. The lights in the ceiling filled the room with a blue-tinged glow, carefully positioned so that they wouldn't produce shadows. On the bed of a large piece of medical equipment that resembled a CT scanner, a young woman was asleep. Her body was covered with a thin sheet, but under it, she was presumably naked.

There was no mistaking her for anyone else.

It was Sayuri Sawatari.

"Why...?" Takuya murmured.

She looked very different from the girl he remembered. Even if she'd been sleeping through them, those three years had changed her. She might have been a little taller. Her plump, soft-looking cheeks were thin now, and her face

looked oval. The outlines of her body were clearly visible through the sheet. There was almost no flesh on it. She seemed nearly dead.

And yet the woman in front of him was beautiful. No, maybe it was because of the state she was in. Takuya had never considered the human shape so beautiful before.

She was perfect.

He gazed at her face. Her eyes showed no sign of opening—in fact, they seemed like they had never been intended to open, molded by an artist.

Her skin was pale. When he looked closer, he could see the veins in her cheeks. The texture made it seem transparent, and the white color was only due to the slant of the light.

She was so lovely it made him shudder.

Takuya realized he was on the verge of tears.

“We believe she stays asleep because her brain isn’t able to handle the information from the parallel worlds that’s flowing into it,” Tomisawa explained as briskly as he would a lecture. No matter what the topic, his tone never got too heavy.

“What happens if she wakes up?”

Tomisawa pointed toward the ceiling in an imitation of the tower, then gestured with his other hand to show the black territory expanding with his right. “We think this world will be instantly swallowed up by a parallel world, with the tower at the epicenter.”

“How could we...?”

“Hmm? Come again?”

“How would we wake her up?”

“I couldn’t say. We haven’t pinned down the conditions for awakening Sleeping Beauty yet. But...as far as the world is concerned, that may be all for the best.”

Takuya fell silent. He was looking at Sayuri’s lashes.

“War will break out in the next week or two, so everyone is gearing up. She’ll be transferred to America’s NSA headquarters,” Tomisawa said. “To tell you the truth, Shirakawa, I’d intended to keep this from you until the end. There’s nothing we can do, so knowing would only hurt you... I may be asking the impossible, but don’t stew about this too much.”

“How did you know? I mean, about me and...”

“When we looked through the records, it didn’t take long for us to learn that you two had been in school together. There were also signs that she’d attempted to contact you, back when her sleep was still intermittent.”

“Sawatari? Contact me?”

“Mm-hmm. It looks as though she tried to send a letter to you, in care of Oka. She fell asleep completely before she finished writing it, so she wasn’t able to send it.”

“Why...?” *Why? How?* Takuya’s mind was blank except for those words echoing over and over. “Why did this happen to Sawatari?”

“We know a lot less than we don’t know, but personally, I’m guessing it wasn’t a coincidence. Reading the report on her personal history gave me a jolt. Ekusun Tsukinoe, the designer of the tower...”

Tomisawa gave a small sigh, apparently suppressing a flicker of intense emotion.

“He’s her grandfather.”

Takuya nearly fled the hospital room. He opened the fire door and took the emergency stairs down to the exit. The water from the sprinklers had melted the snow in the parking lot, but there were still mounds of white snow on the bushes and at the edges of the porte cochere.

He filled his lungs with the frigid outside air and exhaled it as a cloud of heat. He drew a breath, then another. With each inhalation, the thought grew in his chest like an itch.

The tower, the tower. The tower.

That word echoed wildly.

He caught the scent of something unpleasant.

It's the tower.

When he looked up, the tower was overhead—uncommonly, terribly clear. The lens of the atmosphere had drawn the tower right to him.

Takuya's face crumpled. He glared at the great spire with all the hatred he could muster.

Three days had passed.

"The US Army has concluded that the Union's quantum tower in central Ezo is a weapon."

Okabe's clear baritone echoed in the empty workspace at Emishi Manufacturing.

In front of him, Takuya and six other men stood at attention. They were the total membership of Uilta, the armed anti-Union terrorist group. They were also all employees of Emishi Manufacturing. Okabe had started Emishi Manufacturing itself as a cover for the group.

Takuya was watching Okabe steadily, hugging his left arm in its sling.

"Over the past twenty-five years, that tower has become a part of the everyday lives of the Japanese people. We've treated it as a symbol for pretty much everything. Nations, war, race...hopelessness, and even our dreams and aspirations. It means different things to different generations, and to people of differing socioeconomic status. But there's just one thing they all have in common: Everybody sees it as something unreachable and unchanging. There's even a bunch of crazies who worship it."

Okabe's voice echoed off the high ceiling.

"As long as the masses believe the tower can't come down, nothing about this country is going to change. Until its spell is broken, Japan will fear the Union, and the world won't move to reunite the North and South. We'll be divided for as long as that tower exists. The families that were split up will probably stay that way."

Takuya's eyes went to the small, toylike airplane behind Okabe. It wasn't big

enough to carry a human being. Its entire nose was a transparent canopy, and it housed a large, mobile camera.

It was a Predator drone provided by the US military. The factory staff had already made the necessary modifications.

“Early in the morning, three days from now, the US government is going to declare war on the Union. We’re going to take advantage of the confusion at the beginning of that war to bomb the tower.”

No murmur ran through the assembly. Everyone already knew the plan by heart. This was no more than a ritual. Even so, Takuya’s hair stood on end. In his own way, Okabe was trying to rewrite the world.

“We’ll invade Ezo airspace with the unmanned Predator. We’re using a seeker missile mounted with a PL-coated bomb in the attack.”

Takuya looked at the Predator again. In its belly was a red missile. *That thing is going to erase the tower*, he thought. He reviewed the facts in his mind. He was the one who’d put together the seeker missile’s navigation program. The simulation had been flawless. If it was fired within range, it would automatically seek out its target. It was bound to land a direct hit.

I’m going to kill the tower.

A shiver of excitement ran through him.

“As of today, the Uilta Liberation Front is disbanded. I’m shutting the factory down, too.”

Finally, Takuya thought. *I’m going to kill that thing and be free.*

He clenched his right hand into a fist.

2

The tears soon stopped, and they dried quickly. I left the hospital and walked to Shibuya Station instead of taking the bus, speeding up as I went. Standing and waiting at the bus stop meant not making any progress. I wanted to feel that I was at least going somewhere.

As I walked, the wind on my skin sharpened my wits. The clouds of sleep were clearing away, and my heart was pumping, sending oxygen all through me. My brain was functioning again, and my mind was becoming aware of something.

I kept thinking about what that “something” was. I took the Yamanote Line back to Shinjuku, and as I was walking to the dorm, a *click* echoed in my head, as though two pieces of iron had engaged. Like the sound you’d get if you manually pushed down a rusty track switch.

I stared at the memo the nurse had written for me, the one with the name of the hospital Sayuri had been transferred to, etching it indelibly into my memory.

When I got back to the dorm, I pulled all of Mr. Okabe’s letters out from the bottom of the storage cupboard I’d shoved them into. I traced the lines of text with my finger.

Aomori Army College, Wartime Special Strategic Information Processing Laboratory, Neurology Department, Neurological Intensive Care Unit.

That was what the memo said. I checked it against the letter.

There was no mistake.

It was Takuya’s university, Takuya’s lab...

Sayuri was there. With Takuya.

This was a sign, guiding me where I was meant to go.

It was a coincidence, of course.

But this coincidence was telling me to go back to the northern tip of Japan.

Before I did that, though, there was one thing I had to do here in Tokyo. I had to talk to the one person in this city who I’d wanted to treasure. The conversation was going to be hard, and I had hoped I could avoid it. But that wasn’t possible. All the avoiding I’d done until now had only hurt me.

Rika and I hadn’t talked since that one night.

More accurately, I’d called her several times, but she hadn’t picked up. Rika didn’t play games with people. If she didn’t pick up, it was because she didn’t

want to. I also wasn't the type to forge ahead when I wasn't welcome, so for a while, we hadn't shared anything with each other. On top of that, while the private school exams and the first schedule exams for national and public schools were over, the second schedule exams for national and public schools and the secondary exams for private schools were still coming up. There were a whole lot of other things we needed to do.

I didn't have the luxury of pushing this to the back burner.

At this time of year, we barely went to school at all anymore, but there was a school day two days from now. I'd just have to catch her there. For two days, there was nothing to do but wait, and I was too antsy to do anything else.

When the time came, I went to school thirty minutes earlier than usual and waited for Rika outside the classroom. She got to school five minutes before class began, arriving with a friend who had long, permed hair. When I called her name, she flinched. Then she ignored me and went into the classroom. I might as well have been a pebble. Her friend apparently deduced the circumstances and basically told me to get lost, although she put it more politely.

"There's something I really need to tell her," I insisted, my voice sharp but quiet.

With a light gasp, she turned back very slightly. There was no irony in her reaction, only total surprise. But her expression promptly hardened again. "Save it for later," she snapped.

"It has to be today."

Rika and her friend went into the classroom.

For a moment, I considered muscling my way in and grabbing her. People would start asking questions if I did that, though, and I didn't want that for her.

After thinking for a few seconds, I went down the hall, then downstairs. When I came out at the end of the second-floor corridor, I walked straight to the office at its other end. On the counter in front of that office was a green public telephone. I took a phone card out of my wallet, inserted it, then dialed Rika's cell phone number from muscle memory.

After five rings, she picked up. There was no "Hello?" or "This is Mizuno."

Instead, I heard classroom sounds and conversation. And her breathing.

“I’m going back to Aomori today,” I said without preamble.

The other end of the line was as silent as ever, but I could sense her bewilderment.

Just as I was about to continue, she spoke. “But...we still have the second schedule exams.”

“Right. If I finish what I need to do over there quickly, I’m planning to come back and take the test. I don’t know how it’s gonna go, though. If I run out of time, I’ll just skip. And that’s probably what’s gonna happen.”

“What on earth would be worth...?”

“I’m already three years late. I don’t want to wait another day. Rika, I left something undone when I came here.”

“I see,” Rika said a bit sarcastically. “Well, I would hate for you to have to run back because you forgot something. And nobody likes people being late.”

“You’re right.” I didn’t evade her sarcasm. “I’ve been neglecting something important for a long time. It was really important. If I don’t finish it, I won’t be able to live the rest of my life. There was a misunderstanding, and I abandoned it back then. And I abandoned myself in the process. So for the past three years, I’ve been so out of touch with myself. I was just drifting. I shouldn’t be surprised, really. It’s like I took out my own engine and left it behind...”

“So? You’re going to go get it back, then?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a girl, isn’t it?” Her voice was wavering. “There’s a girl you like over there.”

“No,” I replied instantly. It wasn’t a lie, not even close. “There is a girl involved; that part is true. But it isn’t like that. I’m gonna retake myself. Half of me is asleep in a hangar up on a mountain. I’m going to go get it, then come back.”

“Look, I’m not following you. This is really vague.”

For the past little while, I'd been hearing the rustle of fabric on the other end of the line. She seemed to be walking somewhere.

Then it hit me. I turned around.

Rika was coming down the stairs at the other end of the straight hallway, holding her cell phone up to her ear.

We were on opposite ends of the building. The corridor was long, and she was far away. She was looking at me. The students walking by between us intermittently blocked our view of each other. I started to go over to her, until the phone cord stretched to its limit and kept me tethered there.

I hesitated, considering putting down the receiver, but I couldn't do it. If I hung up, I knew I wouldn't ever be able to talk to Rika again.

At the very least, we could talk now. I'd try to be satisfied with that. As I gripped the receiver, my eyes never left Rika's small, distant figure.

"Fujisawa, you didn't like me at all," Rika said in my ear. "I knew that. I thought I didn't mind. For as long as I can remember, I've been lonely. Sometimes I felt like I was a ghost. Like I didn't exist. The people around me were all ghosts, too. Hollow and empty. Some part of me was always anxious. When I was with you, though, the ground actually felt solid, and I started to think I could stay connected. That's why I wanted to be near you. You're special that way, Fujisawa."

For about five seconds, I couldn't find any words.

"The problem is, I don't have any of that solid definition, either," I finally said.

There was a break in the crowd, and I locked eyes with Rika, who was standing just before the vanishing point.

"I was asleep all this time, Rika. Even when I was awake, I still felt like I was in a dream. Always. For the past three years. It's my own fault, nobody else's. Over these three years, my heart has been too empty to feel anything. If I ever had anything special, it was a long time ago. It's completely gone. Anything special you sensed in me is probably just a memory of when I used to be solid."

"And that's enough for me."

Frankly, that one remark shook my resolution considerably.

“Listen,” I said. “Right now, I’m basically a ghost. If we stay together, you’re probably going to see it sooner or later, and whatever illusions you have about me will be gone. Either way, it’s a dead end, and I can already see it coming. I have to go be reborn. I need the strength to tear down walls and fly over fences. I’ll come back solid.”

“Fujisawa, if you go away, I’ll fall apart.” Rika spoke in a monotone. “I can’t make connections without you. You’re still gonna go?”

I started to say *I’m sorry* on reflex, then thought it wouldn’t be appropriate. “Yeah, I am.”

Next to my ear, I heard Rika sigh. In the distance, I could see her shoulders rise and fall. She was looking down, so I couldn’t see her face.

“And? What are you actually going to do over there?”

“Fly a plane,” I said. “Across the strait. To the tower.”

“The Union one?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait just a minute.” She raised her head. “Fujisawa, you don’t pay attention to the papers or the news, do you? They’re saying war might break out this week. Isn’t the area between Aomori and Ezo going to be a battlefield?”

“Yes, it will.” I did know that much.

“And you’re still going? Why now?”

When she asked me that, I realized something important for the first time. “It’s my last chance. The tower may not last the war.”

“Why would you even—?” She started to criticize but stopped before she finished the sentence. Instead, she said, “Remember when I said we should go to Aomori together?”

“Yeah.”

“I was serious about that.”

I fell silent.

“Did you think I was joking?”

“No—” I thought hard. “I don’t know.”

“Fujisawa, sometimes it’s like you came here from some faraway land,” she said. “I think that’s what you’re saying.”

“Hey, once this is all over... I don’t know when that will be or what life will look like then, but I’d like to see you again. When I do, I’ll tell you all about what happened and what I did. I want to see you. Absolutely.”

Rika didn’t answer. The silence stretched for a long time. Neither of us moved. I held my breath, waiting. Finally, she lowered her phone and ended the call. With a muffled *click*, the line went dead.

Even when the crowd and the stairwell had hidden her from view, I held on to the green telephone receiver, reviewing my conversation. She was me. She harbored the same weaknesses I did.

The magnitude of what I’d done to Rika hit me, and I spent a long time there like a statue before I could move again.

3

I wasn’t able to fight the current that had begun to form around me. I couldn’t afford to.

I changed clothes at the dorm, packed very simply, and boarded the Tohoku Shinkansen from Tokyo Station.

I settled into an unreserved seat by the window, and as the train began to move, I took out a paperback I’d shoved into the pocket of my jacket. It was *The Collected Poems of Kenji Miyazawa*, something I’d bought on impulse at a bookstore in Tokyo Station. I began to read.

I hadn’t bought the book for any particularly deep reason, but it moved me far more than I’d expected it to. I hadn’t thought anything of it when I’d read it before, and yet today I was able to feel the texture of the words and emotions as if they were my own flesh and blood.

To you, no doubt this view is quite a miserable one,

*but all I can see
is a blue sky, ever lovely,
and transparent wind.*

(Miyazawa, "Said with the Eyes")

I applied that excerpt to the dreamworld in which Sayuri stood. To her, the world of towers was a very lonely place, but I'd always thought the landscape was beautiful. To be more exact, coming in contact with this poem had made me aware of what I'd always subconsciously believed.

Compared to Sayuri's dream, the view in my Tokyo neighborhood might have been even more miserable, I thought.

And out of nowhere, something occurred to me.

Had Sayuri also been dreaming about my life as she slept?

How had the world around me looked to her?

Sayuri was prone to loneliness, so maybe to her that strip of sky hemmed in by buildings and covered with power lines was like a sign of life. Surrounded by nothing but sky and wind, maybe she yearned for my noisy, cramped town. Maybe she believed it was beautiful, just as it was...

I kept reading. A poem called "Bird" stirred my heart immensely. The feeling was pleasant, as though my emotions were swirling in a convection current.

Come to think of it, I remembered something Yoshitsuru had said a long time ago in his fit of literary enthusiasm, about how the birds that appeared in Kenji Miyazawa's work were intermediaries between this world and the next. When he tried to communicate with his little sister, who'd passed away, he would send his thoughts to her on the wings of birds.

I read that poem over and over, again and again. When I got tired, I laid the book facedown on my lap and slept a little. I leaned against the window, and just before my eyes closed, I caught sight of the Union's tower in the view outside. For some reason, I didn't sense any of the usual intimidation from it. *It's beautiful,* I thought, and fell into a brief sleep.

I transferred to the local line, then got off at Tsugaru-Hamana. I had no

intention of stopping by my parents' house. Pushing through the snow, I cut through the Emishi Manufacturing lot just the way I had three years ago, and then I was standing in the field around the good old abandoned station. The blanket of snow reflected the sunlight, and the sight was almost blinding. The snowfield didn't have a single footprint on it. Sinking up to my ankles in it, I walked toward the hangar. *Come to think of it, there weren't any footprints in the yard at Emishi Manufacturing, either,* I thought. When I cut through, I'd gone to say hi to Mr. Okabe, but both the plant and the office had been closed; I didn't see anyone around.

When I cleared away the snow beside the hangar's back door, then dug up the soil, the key was right where I'd buried it.

The lock was stubborn. I gently brushed the dirt off the key, then tried again. The door opened.

I took one step inside, then froze when I saw the white-and-silver machine inside.

The white light reflecting off the snow streamed in through the open back door, illuminating it from a single direction. It seemed a little smaller than I remembered, as if all the good things it contained had been condensed. Like a snow crystal.

It's the Velaciela.

I unstuck my shoes from the floor and walked over to it. With every step I took, my body trembled. I stopped and stood in front of the nose, then timidly touched it with the tip of my middle finger.

The texture and smell of the hard, slightly flexible carbon nanonet brought back so many memories I almost cried.

I inspected it carefully. Strangely, the plane hadn't deteriorated at all. I'd left it sitting here for years, so parts of it should have come loose or gone slack. I'd braced myself for all the work it would take to get the Velaciela airborne, but...

"It's almost as if time stopped," I murmured. The words hung there for a while, as if they'd frozen in the cold winter air.

I opened the big doors, sealed with a chain, then fired up the engine to see

how it ran. There were almost no issues. The hangar filled with heat and the smell of burning aviation fuel.

I turned off the engine and got right to work.

All the materials and machine tools were still in the hangar. While my body and my hands were in motion, I lost all sense of time. I hadn't experienced the rush of fixating on a task in ages.

As far as hardware went, the Velaciela had been nearly complete three years ago. There were quite a few fine adjustments left, but they weren't difficult.

The problem was the aviation control software. That, and one more thing...

I went over to the violin case that leaned against the wall. It was also exactly where it had been three years ago.

The emotion I felt then was difficult to describe; it was similar to sadness but with a slightly different texture.

I reached out, intending to open the case, but stopped as I realized the sun had already set. I went down the mountain, emerged in front of Tsugaru-Hamana Station, and used the public phone in front of the general store to call Takuya's house. I remembered the number, but it took courage to push the buttons.

Nobody answered.

I went back to the abandoned station, following the same route. I didn't pass anyone along the way. I took a good look as I passed Emishi Manufacturing, and there were no lights on. When I was back at the hangar, in the pale glow of the halogen lamps, it felt as if I were the only person in the world.

I carried the heater over to the bench, curled up in a blanket, and fell asleep.

The next day, I went through the motions again. I wasn't able to get ahold of Takuya.

The day after that, my call got through.

We'd said we'd meet on the edge of the Ookawadai shopping street.

Takuya was there first, leaning against a telephone pole, smoking a cigarette.

There was a railway overpass behind him, and a freight train loaded with tanks was trundling by, over the road. He was watching them steadily, but when he heard my footsteps, he looked my way.

“Hey,” he said expressionlessly.

I’d been nervous, but when I saw his face, I started feeling awkward and embarrassed, and my cheeks rose into a little smile.

“It’s been three years, huh, Takuya?”

It was after three o’clock, but neither of us had had lunch yet, so we went into a Chinese restaurant on the shopping street and got ramen. Aside from us, there were a couple of US soldiers in the restaurant. A fourteen-inch TV up on a high shelf was showing the news; it said that Tokyo had gone on alert in preparation for the war. Takuya was glaring at the broadcast, his eyes sharp.

“When did you get here?” Takuya asked. He kept his eyes on the TV.

“The day before yesterday. I’ve been staying up at the abandoned station,” I told him, slurping ramen.

“Up there?”

“Yeah.” Then I asked him something I’d been wondering about for a while. “Takuya, what happened to your arm?”

He glanced at the sling. “Oh... Stuff.”

“What do you mean, ‘stuff’?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

With that, Takuya dexterously ate his ramen one-handed. I swear, the guy’s got class even when he’s injured. Even when he’s eating ramen. That side of him hadn’t changed a bit.

It was a little bit funny, and I smiled.

Come to think of it, we’d stopped talking after a fight, three years ago. Apparently, he wasn’t planning to bring that up at all. I liked things better that way myself. I did want to ask what had happened with the younger girl he’d been dating back then, but I knew it was a dumb question.

“So? What did you want?” Takuya said.

I still hadn’t told him anything. I wasn’t sure how to bring up something so complicated. “This isn’t really the place for it,” I said. “Wanna come to the abandoned station?”

Takuya closed his mouth, compressing his lips into a thin line. He was silent for quite a while.

Then he answered in a low voice:

“Sure.”

On the way to the abandoned station, we knocked on the door of the Emishi Manufacturing office, but there still wasn’t anyone there.

“Maybe they’re off again today... Takuya, do you know?”

Takuya didn’t say anything.

A cat meowed, down by my feet. It was the half-stray cat that lived at the factory.

“Hey, Chobi. How’ve you been? It’s been a long time, huh?!”

I crouched down and held out my hand. Chobi rubbed his forehead against it amiably. That made me happy, so for a little while, I petted his head and moved my fingers in front of his nose, teasing him.

I heard the *scrunch* of footsteps on the sandy ground. When I looked over, Takuya had started walking away, his face hard and sullen.

“Hey, Takuya.”

I petted Chobi one last time, then straightened up and started to follow him. He was striding up the mountain track to the abandoned station, and I hurried after him.

When we got through the forest and emerged onto the field around the abandoned station, Takuya walked not toward the hangar but toward the platforms. His strides were sure and determined, as if that had been his destination all along. I followed him. Then we stood together on a platform. The lake was frozen; if I stepped down gently, I might be able to walk on the ice.

We stood side by side, gazing at the frozen lake.

“What I wanted to talk about is kind of complicated, but...”

I started to speak, but Takuya interrupted.

“Wait. Let me tell mine first. It’s serious, too. Don’t talk about it with anyone else.”

“What? Geez,” I jabbed, but he’d been prickly this whole time. I’d guessed he had a major secret.

“Emishi Manufacturing is the Uilta Liberation Front,” he said, getting right to the point. “That’s why there’s no one there. It’s already been shut down.”

I was planning to keep my mouth shut, but I had to ask a question. “When did it close?”

“This week.” He looked at me, a bit nonplussed. “You don’t seem very surprised. Did you know already?”

“No.” I shook my head. “But it seems plausible. Besides, you told me a long time ago that that place wasn’t what it looked like.”

“Did I?” he muttered. “Well, whatever; that’ll make this go faster. What I’m about to tell you is... I’m telling you because it seems like the least I can do. I’m sorry, but just listen for a while. Don’t say anything.”

Then he began to tell a long story, and I wasn’t ready for any of it.

He talked about Uilta’s principles.

About Mr. Okabe’s separation and his wife.

About the relationship between quantum physics and the tower that he’d learned about at the college.

The fact that the Union’s tower was a system designed to detect parallel worlds and give highly accurate predictions of the future.

The fact that the system was careening out of control and other worlds were beginning to seep into this one around the tower.

The fact that the US military considered the tower a type of suicide weapon.

I picked up a rock that was lying on the platform and flung it at the lake as hard as I could. The rock struck the ice and slid away.

The fact that Takuya had joined Uilta and had been injured during an operation.

And...the encounter with sleeping Sayuri in the hospital ward.

He explained that Sayuri's brain was closely linked to the tower. That the tower's activity had increased as her level of consciousness rose. That if she woke up, the tower would go into full operation. That the whole world would probably be rewritten when it happened. That when Sayuri woke, this world would most likely disappear almost instantly.

The US Army and Uilta had joined forces and were planning to blow up the tower.

Takuya crouched down on the platform and laid it all out for me with perfect neutrality. It was proof that on the inside, he wasn't neutral at all. That's how people get when they're keeping themselves under tight control.

I threw another rock. The rock slid away again. The ice wouldn't let it go any deeper.

When he'd finished his story, I was still quiet, so he shifted to more technical topics. He talked about the proof that parallel worlds existed and the possibility that they affected human brains. "Do you understand, Hiroki?" he said, probably assuming I would have trouble following the part about parallel worlds.

"I get it. I understand everything now," I told him. I could swallow all the information as easily as spring water. After all, I'd actually seen the world branching.

"What do you understand, exactly?" he asked.

"The phenomenon called "me" is a single blue illumination, a hypothetical organic lamp run by alternating currents (a complex of transparent ghosts)'..."

"What?"

"It means me, you, and everybody else is a hypothetical phenomenon,

doesn't it?" I said. "The world and humans are no more than potential theories, like ghosts. And Sawatari is standing at the junction that determines which phenomena to activate."

Takuya took a few seconds to process, then seemed to understand the gist of it. "Guess that's one way of putting it."

"I have one question," I said. "If the tower is destroyed, what happens to Sawatari?"

"Nobody knows." He dismissed the question flatly. "There's one hypothesis that seems very probable."

"What is it?"

"Right now, Sawatari is an external device for Ekusun Tsukinoe's quantum tower system. The information processing that the tower should technically be doing—her brain is handling it instead. Meanwhile, part of her conscious activity has been transferred to the tower's system. Essentially, Sawatari and the tower aren't transmitting to each other; they've been combined into one entity. The tower is Sawatari's brain, and Sawatari is the tower itself."

"You're not saying..."

A shudder crawled up from my feet to my shoulders.

"Probably..." he said, "if we destroy the tower, Sawatari's conscious activity will stop permanently."

The air between us went cold.

"That's all I have to say," he told me. "Your turn."

"Fly the Velaciela?" Takuya echoed.

I'd told him everything while we walked. Compared to Takuya's story, mine seemed poorly defined. We entered the hangar through the back door, and I raised the breaker switch. The floodlights came on, illuminating the white wings.

"With Sawatari in it?" he asked again.

"Yeah."

I stroked the fuselage.

“In another day, I’ll be done with the assembly work. The only issue left is the control software...”

“Wait. Were you actually listening to what I said? Sawatari can’t wake up, and the tower—”

“Is being targeted by terrorists. I got all that.”

I took my hand away from the Velaciela and went over to Takuya, who was sitting in a wooden chair.

“That’s why I need your help. Remember what I said? I’ve been thinking, all this time. If we fly her to the tower, Sawatari will wake up.”

Takuya didn’t look at me. He was watching the blinking LEDs on the modem on top of the table.

“Did you come back for a stupid reason like that?” he finally said with contempt.

I stiffened. That was one of the last things I’d expected, and the betrayal created a little bit of anger inside me.

“‘Stupid reason’...?” I searched for words, couldn’t find any. Why couldn’t I ever be articulate for once? “I mean, we promised, didn’t we?”

The red lights on the modem were still blinking. Takuya was still watching them. Suddenly, the lights pissed me off. Slowly, I moved toward it. I was planning to switch it off, but that would be pointless. Instead, I latched onto the corner of the table with my fingertips.

“I dream about Sawatari. Over and over, again and again.” I looked down at the wood grain. “Sawatari’s all by herself in this deserted place, and she said she can’t remember anything. Except our promise.”

I looked back at the Velaciela’s wings, under the pale glare of the floodlights. Then I looked at Takuya’s pale profile. He didn’t move.

“I promised her again, in a dream. I told her I’d take her to the tower for sure this time. I can’t believe that was just a dream!” I was yelling and out of breath now.

Takuya took a cigarette out of the pocket of his duffle coat and lit it. Then he took three short draws on it. He sighed, exhaling smoke.

“So you saunter back here after three years talking to me about dreams? Just looking at you pisses me off.”

He flicked the cigarette away with his index finger. It was an efficient way to get rid of the worthless remains so that he didn't have to look at them. His attitude stunned me. Takuya ground the glowing orange butt under his foot.

He stood up.

“I don't have time to play kids' games with you.”

He took an object out of the inside pocket of his jacket. At first, I couldn't really process what it was.

“This is happening because you won't stop obsessing about this thing.”

He walked over to the Velaciela, and with frighteningly practiced hands, loaded a cartridge into the grip. He racked the slide.

“I'll make you forget.”

He pointed the black, gleaming handgun at the Velaciela.

“Don't!” I yelled.

Takuya's eyes glinted cruelly.

That was the last thing I saw while I was in my right mind. Then I completely lost track of what was going on. I was only half-conscious, and my body just moved on its own. It's strange, sometimes. I wonder why people move automatically like that, before you think. Sometimes my body acts as though it's somebody else entirely.

A shot rang out, and my eardrums stung from the blast.

Outside, I heard a flock of startled crows take flight.

Takuya was lying on the ground.

The handgun was on the floor.

I didn't even have to look to know the Velaciela was okay.

The knuckles of my right hand tingled. I'd knocked down Takuya. As I realized what I'd done, my breathing grew rougher. The oxygen didn't help to quell my excitement; in fact, the blood was only rushing to my head faster.

Takuya spat, then got to his feet.

My excitement slowed my reaction, and Takuya was instantly in front of me. I felt the blow against my face, and I knew he'd punched me back. My mind grew dim, and I tried to hold on to consciousness as I collapsed to the floor and started coughing.

"Takuyaaa!"

To my ears, my scream was an equal mixture of rage and pleading and bewilderment. I'd managed to get my upper body off the floor, and I clenched my fists. The muscles in my arms hardened. Apparently, I was planning to use those. By the time I planted my right foot on the ground, there was a black hole in front of me. The muzzle of the gun. I froze. Even before my thoughts got around to *Look out or I'm going to die*, I'd stopped moving completely. I looked at the bony hand gripping the gun. I knew that hand well. Beyond it, through his glasses, I saw Takuya's eyes.

"It's either save Sawatari or save the world."

His voice wasn't loud, but it seemed to reverberate all through the hangar. Maybe the echo was in my head. I couldn't move. I didn't care about the gun anymore; the shot he'd just fired was more terrifying than that. Not even my eyes could move. What he'd just put into words was something I'd known and tried to ignore. He lowered the gun, but I could still feel the choice aimed between my eyes.

Takuya turned on his heel and walked across the floorboards toward the back door.

I listened to his footsteps; they marked a precise rhythm. Inside me, the rhythm brought certain phrases to mind. *Bird—*

Beneath a pale-blue heaven

in the reflected light from the highland snow

wind is blowing, transparent.

"It hurts too much," I said.

Burning in ultraviolet rays, a single bird

rests on a heart stretched thin,

"I could never bring myself to stop thinking about Sawatari."

trying to remember, with desperate impatience,

"When I try not to think about her, it just hurts."

an ancient, pale-blue dream

"Time is stopped for us. For our feelings. We're getting left behind; if we don't do anything, we'll just fall farther and farther."

Like a boat, the bird...

Abruptly, Takuya yelled angrily, "That's why we're destroying the tower!" The rhythm of his footsteps stopped.

"Takuya, you've changed," I said without looking at him, still unable to move.

"Of course I have," he shot back. "But you're still a kid, Hiroki."

The back door closed with callous finality.

Even so, the snow sculptures here and there are far too still.

4

He was asleep.

Save the world?

Takuya didn't care about the world. He couldn't have cared less what happened to it. "Sawatari or the world" was no more than a phrase he'd said to keep his own resolution from being blunted. All Takuya wanted was to wipe that tower off the face of the Earth. He wanted to kill the childishness inside himself. By destroying the tower, by letting Sayuri fall as an unfortunate casualty, he believed he'd be free from who he used to be, free to be who he wanted.

“Oh, wow... An airplane?!”

In his dream, Takuya was in the hangar at the abandoned station. Sayuri was there. She was her younger self, in her third year of middle school. She ran up to the Velaciela, turned around, and said those words to him.

It was summer. The abandoned station was surrounded by deep green. The air was hot.

Takuya woke up.

He sat up in bed. He'd been grinding his molars, and the cheek where he'd been struck hurt.

“Dammit!”

5

I was asleep.

The flesh of my cheek tingled. My cheekbone hurt. I felt awful. The sound of the bell echoing through the school meant we needed to head home.

The spring air clung to my skin like a lukewarm bath. In the dream, I was walking down a hall at my middle school, in the smaller form of my fifteen-year-old self. Outside the windows, pale-pink cherry trees swayed in the wind. There were quite a few leaves on them. Even now, flowers fell, dancing on the breeze.

When I reached the spot under the carved wooden plate that said YEAR 3, CLASS 3, I opened the wooden sliding door. As I stepped into the classroom, I spotted a human shape. Was one of my classmates still there?

It was Sayuri.

She was there by herself, sitting at her desk.

When she saw me come in, she hastily wiped away tears. I pretended I hadn't noticed she'd been crying. Sayuri was wearing her PE tracksuit; it was weird that she was dressed like that when she wasn't in a sports club and it was time to go home, but I decided not to think about that, either.

I was somewhat uncomfortable, so I said something that sounded like an

excuse.

“I forgot something, so...”

“I see.” Sayuri was trying hard to seem calm, but her voice shook.

Aside from my footsteps, there was no sound at all. As I crossed to my own desk, I had to fill the silence.

“You’re not going home, Sawatari?”

“N-no, I will...”

Sayuri averted her eyes, tugging on the hem of her sweatshirt as if her appearance bothered her. Her violin case was sitting on her desk.

Still looking away, I felt around in my desk and pulled out two magazines. I was hyperaware of Sayuri, so my movements were stilted and unnatural. I could feel her eyes on me.

“Hiroki, what happened to your cheek?” she asked.

My heart skipped a beat. “I sort of fought with Takuya...,” I said, stowing the magazines in my bag.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh yeah, it’s fine. I’m sure we’ll make up again soon. Probably.” I slung my bag over my shoulder. “Okay, Sawatari. Good night.”

“Oh, wait, Hiroki.” She stopped me, and I turned back. She had partly risen from her chair. “Are you going to the station?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Can I go with you? I’ll get changed right away.”

Sayuri went into the girls’ locker room and shut the door. I waited in the hallway, leaning against the wall. To avoid the embarrassment of focusing on the door, I looked to the side, out the window. Warm light from the slanting sun streamed in through the glass.

The school was completely empty and quiet. Beyond the door, I could hear the faint sound of rustling fabric, and I’d imagine what was going on in there, then try to stop imagining it, then imagine again. Before long, Sayuri emerged,

dressed in her sailor uniform. She was hugging her violin case to her chest.

“I’ve always felt like...,” Sayuri said as we cut across the dusky athletic field, side by side. The words were more for her sake than mine, I think.

“Like what?”

“Like I was going to lose something. As beautiful as this world is...”

We left the school grounds and made our way down a narrow road that ran beside the forest.

“Everything in it...”

We walked along a road between farm fields and sparse houses.

“...feels so far away.”

By the side of that road through nothing, there was one solitary vending machine. In the dim evening light, its pale fluorescent glow seemed terribly forlorn.

I stopped in front of it, dug some loose change out of my pocket, and bought two cans of hot coffee. I pushed one of them into Sayuri’s hands. I didn’t really pay attention to her reaction.

Three years ago... No, almost four years now. Back then, I didn’t really understand why I’d done that.

Thinking about it now, I have some idea of why. I wanted to tell her something. *You may be all alone, far away from most of the world, but I know there’s light inside of you. Even with no one around you, you hold something warm inside you.* Even I wasn’t really clear on what I wanted to say, though, and it was really hard to express the emotions to someone else in words.

I started walking, but Sayuri stayed where she was.

I looked back.

The sky was a warm color. Directly behind Sayuri was the tower, dyed red.

Colored by the setting sun, Sayuri stood in the middle of the low, crimson sky.

The tower was behind her; the violin was against her chest.

She was smiling faintly.

Just then, in my eyes—

Sayuri was the center of the shining world.

The wind blew, and her hair streamed with it. She was looking at me.

I looked at her.

“Oh, I see...”

*

I woke up in the hangar at the abandoned station. My face was flushed from the heat of the stove. As my mind woke up, the dream slipped away. I sat up, one hand to my forehead. I'd been sleeping on the sofa bed in the Velaciela's hangar.

“Something really important just...”

I tried to retrieve the vanishing traces of the dream. The sights I knew I'd seen had to lie deep in the labyrinth of my memories, but they didn't come back. The faint echoes of the emotion made me restless.

“Just when I thought I had it figured out...”

Why do the important things show up only in dreams? Why do dreams slip out of reach the moment you wake up? I kept stubbornly groping through the abyss of my mind. My fingertips never found anything.

I was really on my own. No one would come to help me. I'd just have to do it all myself. I'd come back here to do what had to be done, even if I had to do it alone.

My resolution was set.

I turned off the stove and dashed outside. I was feeling aggressive. A pleasant blue sky spread over the drifts of white snow all around me. Nearby birds took flight, startled by the sound of the door opening.

I stopped for a moment, taking in the view for a few seconds. Then I set off down the mountain at a run.

As I ran, I thought about what I'd have to do. If I ignored the question of

specific methods, what I needed to do was simple: Either cancel Mr. Okabe's terrorist bombing or postpone it. Get Sayuri out of the college's hospital ward. Finish the Velaciela, put Sayuri on board, and get to the tower before it was destroyed. I just had a few more things to do than before, that was all. Would it work out somehow? Of course it would; I'd make it work. Stopping or backtracking wasn't an option.

I got through the broken fence and entered the Emishi Manufacturing lot.

Ordinarily, I would have cut straight through the courtyard, but this time I went around, following the fence, to make myself less obvious. Then I reached the plant. It was completely closed, shutters down, like an enormous box with no lid. Naturally, it was locked. I walked all the way around it, but there didn't seem to be any way to sneak in.

I went over to the prefab office building. The plant and the office were linked on the inside. That building was completely locked up as well, but of course, there were no shutters on the windows. I held my breath, taking a good look at the place. I couldn't sense anybody inside.

Walking softly, I climbed the steel stairway overlooking the yard. The entrance to the office was at the top of those stairs, on the second floor. There was an aluminum door whose top half was made of frosted glass; I flattened myself against it, watching and listening for a little while longer.

When I was sure the coast was clear, I broke the glass with an empty can.

I stuck my hand in through the broken pane, twisted the lever on the knob, unlocking the door, and opened it. Of course, no lights were on inside.

I stepped into the darkened building.

I'd decided that there was a fifty-fifty chance the drone they were planning to use in the terror attack was being stored at the plant. A simple trick would do; something they wouldn't find until it was time to fly it. I just had to delay their plan for half a day—or even a full day, if I got lucky.

I walked down a corridor so narrow two people would barely have been able to pass each other.

I'd been careless. At a corner in the hallway, somebody grabbed my arm. By

the time I realized I'd been caught, they'd hauled me forward, shoved me down, and pinned me in a painful grip. My shoulder was twisted the wrong way, and if I moved around too much, I'd dislocate the joint.

Something hard was pressed against the back of my head. I thought it was probably the same thing I'd seen yesterday. Sweat beaded on my skin, and I felt the humidity rising.

"So it's you, Hiroki. Thought so. You've grown... Is this how you're thanking me for those letters? Helluva way to return a favor."

I knew Mr. Okabe's voice, although I couldn't see his face. All I could see was the dust on the floor.

"Mr. Okabe!" I shouted. "If you destroy the tower, Sawatari's going to die!"

"Huh?" Mr. Okabe didn't let up on my shoulder, and the gun stayed pressed to my head.

"It's the tower's fault that Sawatari is asleep! She's connected to it! Please call this off! Or at least wait! I'm going to bring Sawatari back, so just hold off until then."

"I don't know what's going on, but, Hiroki..." His deep voice sent vibrations into the back of my head. "It's too late to change the plan."

"Please! Mr. Okabe!"

"No dice. It's already settled— And I can't let you leave here."

My sweat went cold in an instant. The gun pressed against my head, pushing my face into the floor. I was going to die—

It was the first time I'd ever really felt my own mortality. Mr. Okabe's weight was on top of my legs, and even if I'd tried to fight him, I couldn't move. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Wait!"

I jolted at the sharp cry; for a second, I thought I'd been shot. Then footsteps approached. Very familiar footsteps.

"What?" Mr. Okabe said.

“Let us destroy the tower,” said Takuya’s voice.

I forced my head up. The gun’s cold muzzle touched the back of my neck, and I shuddered again. Takuya, his left arm still in a sling, was standing at the corner of the corridor with his arms folded.

“He and I will do the tower. We’ll carry Sawatari and the seeker missile in the Velaciela. If she goes to the tower, she might wake up, and then we can drop the missile.”

“Oh yeah...?”

“Either way, the tower has to go, for Sawatari. Once she’s awake, it won’t matter what happens to it. This is for her... Well, it was. We’re going to the tower for ourselves.”

“...”

“Please, Mr. Okabe.”

“Takuya!” I called, from the pit of my stomach.

“I can’t let you guys do that.”

The muscles in Takuya’s arms twitched.

A cold silence filled the room.

The only one I could see from my position was Takuya, but he and Mr. Okabe were staring each other down. Takuya’s shoulders rose and fell several times.

“I wanna tell you kids not to, anyway, but...” Mr. Okabe’s weight rose off me. “If I’m being honest, I’ve got a damn soft spot for stories like yours. The whole goal of Uilta is to put broken pieces back together... Make sure you bring that thing down.”

I drew a breath. “Mr. Okabe!” I called his name for the zillionth time. He smacked the back of my head.

“I’ll give you the seeker data. Load it into your plane.” Then Mr. Okabe spoke to Takuya. “Hurry up and put that thing away.”

Takuya slipped the handgun he’d been gripping under the cover of his sling back into his jacket. Then he wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans several times.

As he drove through the dark streets, Takuya kept running through methods. He didn't have the time to try anything complicated, which meant there was only one way.

He'd have to ask for Maki's help. But Takuya didn't want to drag her into this. In fact, he wanted to avoid it at all costs. There was no other way, though. No time, either...

Still irresolute, Takuya went to the college. He parked the car in the underground garage, which he didn't normally use, then went into the grad students' room at the Tomisawa Lab.

"Shirakawa. You're starting work this late?"

It was two in the morning, and yet Maki was sitting at her desk, in front of her computer. Takuya had planned to phone her and have her come over, and the fact that she was already here unsettled him a little.

"What about you, Maki...?"

"I have a patient here, you know. I'm on night duty today."

"Oh..."

"They didn't get her transferred to the mainland in time." Maki swiveled her office chair and stretched. "Even though the war's starting today or tomorrow."

Takuya went over to the desk beside Maki's and leaned against it lightly. The latest edition of *Newsweek* lay on the desk, so he picked it up for no particular reason. "I wonder. Maybe it's actually because war is so close. They've, um... Maybe they don't have time for the patient right now. If the war expands beyond predictions, the tower research itself may end up being pointless."

"That's a scary thought... I wonder if the rumor about the terrorist bombing is true."

"What's the target?"

"The tower. You hadn't heard that one?"

"No. There's a rumor about that?"

“This lab may be targeted, too...” Maki picked up a stick of Pocky and nibbled on it. “And the riskiest times will be today and tomorrow. Wonderful.”

“It’s all right,” Takuya said dispassionately.

“What makes you say that?”

“This place is only researching the tower; it has nothing to do with the split. The terrorist group is fighting the ones who are keeping the country apart.”

“Hmm.”

“Ultimately, the whole problem is the split. It’s wrong to break up a whole country, Maki. Lately, I’ve been wondering whether Tsukinoe was trying to do the same thing the terrorists are.” As Takuya spoke, he paged through the magazine. It was a special issue about the pending war crisis. *Feature: The Threat of Terrorism. Countdown to the Final Line. The Nightmare Scenario of a Prolonged War...* All the headlines were full of fear. “That inversion phenomenon around the tower... We treat it as if the cause is unknown, and it’s assumed to be the result of a function going out of control, but I think it might be a trap that Ekusun Tsukinoe incorporated on purpose. He was from Honshu. It’s likely that it was a type of terrorist bomb meant to counteract the North-South division: ‘If you keep doing this, then I’ll drag in Ezo and Honshu and the Union mainland and make it all disappear.’”

Maki was watching Takuya, her eyes round. Her hand stopped carrying Pocky to her mouth. Abruptly, she looked away from him.

“Shirakawa, you’re a little hard to figure out. I bet you have a lot of secrets.”

“No...that’s not...”

Maki rose from her chair, breaking up the frozen atmosphere. “Sorry; I’ll go make some tea. And then...”

As she passed him, she pointed to her own cheek. “Let me treat that for you.”

Maki put two servings’ worth of beans in the coffee maker, then took the first aid kit out of the shared locker and came back. “Sit,” she said. Takuya sat down in an office chair, as he’d been told, then submitted to her treatment of his cheek.

“You’ve been getting hurt a lot lately, Shirakawa.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Having a hard time?”

“No, it’s fine.”

Maki stood in front of Takuya, applying a bandage to his cheek. Her modest chest, with its ID card, was right in front of his eyes. Takuya was aware that Maki’s kindness tended to make his heart fragile. Was this what big sisters were like? It probably wasn’t quite the same thing, but he guessed he wasn’t too far off the mark.

“I’m sorry,” Takuya said again.

Abruptly, Maki looked pained. It was only for a moment, and then the expression disappeared. She began clearing away the leftover gauze.

“He was my best friend,” he murmured.

“Huh?” Maki turned back.

“The guy I fought with. We wanted the same thing, worked toward the same goal.”

“Right.” Maki nodded kindly. She was always kind.

“But we moved on to different places, and our goal disappeared... I don’t know how to put it. I lost sight of where I should be heading. All this power, these impulses I couldn’t understand, kept bubbling up and overflowing inside me. I couldn’t get anywhere. I felt locked up, somehow.”

“Mm-hmm,” Maki said, encouraging him to continue.

“When they let me join this laboratory, I was so relieved. Like I’d found the thing I needed to do. I was also happy about getting to meet you.”

He looked up at Maki.

Maki’s cheeks were flushed.

“So”—Takuya stood up—“I didn’t want to get you involved. I didn’t want to do it this way.”

He walked over to her, close enough that he could have pulled her to him and embraced her. He considered doing that but didn't. She was looking up at him. He reached out—and removed the ID card from her chest.

She was bewildered, but she didn't resist. She looked at him questioningly.

Takuya slipped the ID into his pocket, glanced at her, then headed for the door. He could feel liquid rising inside his face; he was on the verge of tears. Maki seemed to have sensed something unusual about him, but she was still just standing there. Takuya worked the console beside the door.

"There's something I have to do. When this is all over—"

He turned to look at her.

"I'd like to see you again, Maki."

Maki came to herself with a jolt, finally processing that he was saying good-bye. She seemed to have realized that he was suggesting they'd never see each other again. "Shirakawa!" She ran toward Takuya. Before she reached him, Takuya opened the door, made a swift exit into the hall, and closed it again. Then he locked it, using Maki's ID card. Without an ID, that door wouldn't open.

In the corridor, Takuya gazed at the door. He stayed that way for quite a long time. She was probably pounding violently on the other side of the locked door. It was thick and airtight, enough to block the sound.

Finally, he started down the hall, his expression determined.

Carrying a sports bag with his personal items, Takuya stood in front of the door to the neurological ICU.

He slid Maki's ID through the card reader. With a hiss of compressed air, the heavy door slid open.

Sayuri's body lay there, exactly as it was the last time he'd seen it.

She was beautiful, the sort of beauty that accurately navigated the complicated twists and turns of his heart to strike right to its depths.

When he touched her, he felt something like reverence, even awe.

"Sawatari."

He put an arm behind her, raising her to a sitting position. He quickly dressed her in his own spare clothes, then wrapped her in his coat.

“This time, we’ll go to the place we promised.”

With Sayuri on his back, he walked through the deserted halls. The idea that this was the last time he’d see the college filled him with emotion. The smooth hallways, like clean rooms; the pale, inorganic lighting. Intellectual, logical people. He hadn’t disliked being here. He hadn’t disliked it at all. Now that he was carrying Sayuri, his footsteps echoed differently. He’d probably never come back here. He felt his heart ache. There was somewhere he needed to go.

Someone was standing in the passage that led to the underground garage.

“It’s not too late, Shirakawa.”

Tomisawa’s expression was sterner than he’d ever seen it.

“Too late for what, Professor?”

“We can make it so this never happened. Return that girl to her hospital room, then take a week off at home. I’ll forget this. You forget it, too. I’m sure Maki will forget as well. Will you do that?”

“No, Professor. I don’t want to be any later for this. It’s too important.”

Tomisawa gave a theatrical sigh. Sighing was a habit of his. “Shirakawa, be reasonable. Right now, she’s the US-Japan alliance’s most important specimen. Exactly what do you think will happen if you take her? Forget research; you won’t even be able to show your face in the West again.”

“Probably not,” Takuya replied stiffly. “But she’ll be saved...I think.”

“Frankly, I’d rather protect you, Shirakawa. You’ve got talent. If possible, I’d like you to continue your research and achieve greatness in your field.”

“I’m very sorry. That’s all I can say.”

“There’s the phase shift as well. If you wake her up, the world itself may vanish.”

“We’ll handle that. We do have a chance.”

“Uilta, hmm?” Tomisawa knew about that, too. “Will it really go so well? Are

you planning to stake the entire world on this?"

"Yes." Takuya nodded. "I am."

He and Tomisawa glared at each other.

"This won't do you any good," Tomisawa said.

"No, Professor. This *is* for my own good. I have to, or my soul will die."

Takuya was just reacting to the other man's provocation with a retort of his own, but the moment the words left his mouth, he was certain they were true.

"Professor, don't you have anything like that? Something you'd throw away everything for? That's what this is now. For me, anyway."

Confusion raced through Tomisawa's expression. He seemed to have connected with something vital inside him.

"To tell you the truth, up until a minute ago, I was torn. Talking to you has helped me make up my mind. I'm going. Please move, sir."

"..."

"Please move."

Finally, listlessly, Tomisawa yielded the way. Takuya walked straight by, and Tomisawa followed him with his eyes.

"Professor...", Takuya said without turning around. "Thank you very much."

Then he resumed walking. He never looked back.

He drove through the darkness. Most of the traffic signals were blinking, ordering caution. Every so often, he came up against a red light, and then he'd check on Sayuri, who was lying in the back seat. He didn't smoke.

There were no cars in front of him, and he didn't pass any going the other way. He reached Emishi Manufacturing in an hour. Okabe was waiting alone, leaning against the railing of the projecting balcony on the second floor of the office building. When he saw Takuya's car pull in, he went down the stairs and into the courtyard to meet him.

Takuya got out of the car.

“Is she really going to wake up if you do this?” Okabe asked, after he’d peered into the car and seen Sayuri wrapped in a blanket.

“I doubted it myself at first, but...I’m sure now.”

Seeing that Okabe had lit a cigarette, Takuya put one of his own between his lips.

“That’s probably what’s tethering Sawatari to reality. Even now, she keeps waiting for the Velaciela in her dreams. Even before she fell asleep, she had visions of the future, and she asked us for a favor. She asked us to rescue her... I think Hiroki and I both sensed that on some level.”

Takuya tossed his cigarette away, grinding it under his foot. He’d hardly smoked any of it. For some reason, his body hadn’t really wanted tobacco. He’d looked down, but then he returned his gaze to Okabe.

“The Velaciela seats two, and I can’t pilot it with this arm. I’m going to stay here and watch what happens to the tower... And, Mr. Okabe, can I ask you something?”

“Speak.”

“Why are you letting us do this?”

“Uh...”

“Frankly, I didn’t think Uilta would ever choose to introduce more uncertainty into the plan at this stage. Why did you do it?”

“‘Why,’ huh?” Okabe smirked, the cigarette still in his mouth. “A long time back, see, there were these two kids who were making an airplane... Not you two; this was further back than that.”

“Huh?”

“It was a hydroplane with a reciprocating engine. There was this one girl, and they were desperate to get her attention.”

“...”

“I just happened to remember those guys.”

“I assume these are both people I know?” Takuya asked.

“Dunno... Can I ask a question, too?”

“Yes.”

“Is that your reason? Wanting to save the girl?”

“That’s part of it. Sawatari asked us for help, and we said we would. We owe it to her now. That isn’t the whole reason, though; it’s for us, too. We had to keep that promise. We can’t live our lives in debt. We have to prove to ourselves that we follow through.”

Okabe grinned with the cigarette still dexterously between his teeth. “You were a kid tryin’ to act like an adult, and then you actually started growin’ into one... Hmm?”

He glanced at the sky.

“I thought it was getting colder. Sure enough, it’s coming down again.”

Snow had begun drifting down. When Takuya tilted his head straight up, it looked as though there was a canopy of countless snowflakes radiating out from a central point, sometimes sketching spirals.

“I’m gonna go now, before it starts really coming down,” he said.

“Right... Well, you know.”

Okabe walked up to Takuya and gave him a hearty whack on the back. “You haven’t worked together in a while. Play nice.”

*

That was the last thing he wrote about in his journal.

I never saw those sights, but I dream about them often.

7

The pallid atmosphere unique to snowy nights crept in silently. In the hangar at the abandoned station, I was at work on the laptop computer I’d been using for the past three years.

The Velaciela used a fly-by-wire system. Essentially, it was completely controlled by computer. It took a complicated program to work the appendages

of the aircraft accurately, with no errors whatsoever. The work was like running nerves through an artificial body, linking the mental to the physical. I was only putting the finishing touches on something Takuya and I had made together three years ago, but my instincts for programming were very rusty.

I brought up the list of BIOSes, examining it and picking out what I needed. The flickering green characters were hard on my eyes.

“Which is it...? This one?”

I entered a file name.

There was an audible response from the monitor in the cockpit.

It was an error. A string of red characters showed on the LCD screen of my computer as well. The error message read *Wrong BIOS version! Be careful, idiot!*

For a second, I was genuinely annoyed, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I sighed. What the hell, man?

The sound of the back door opening startled me.

Takuya walked in slowly. He was carrying a person on his back. When I saw her long, black hair, finely dusted with snow, both my breath and my mind stopped. Returning to my senses, I picked up the stove that I’d set by the table, without turning it off, and carried it over to the sofa bed. Takuya lowered Sayuri to the sofa, then tucked a blanket around her.

Takuya and I gazed wordlessly at the sleeping girl.

She was eighteen now, and her appearance had changed by three years. She looked exactly like the Sayuri I’d seen in my dream. That really was more than a dream...

She was breathing quietly. The heat of the stove melted the snow, and water droplets fell from her hair.

Sayuri was here. This wasn’t a dream.

Something was welling up inside my chest.

If I stayed quiet, I might end up staring at her forever, so I forced myself to speak. “Takuya, what BIOS version am I supposed to use? We changed the

rudder position partway through, remember? I don't have anything after that."

After I said it, I realized this was the first time we'd spoken to each other properly since we'd come to blows here two days ago, and I wanted to cringe with embarrassment. Maybe Takuya felt the same way. He was blushing faintly. He took a case with a disc in it out of his pocket and tossed it to me. I caught it, then looked at it closely. There was nothing written on it.

"It's on that. So is the stuff for the seeker missile... What's left to do?"

"There's a little wiring for the superconducting motor. And then the software's..."

"I got some US Army intel from Mr. Okabe." Takuya took his laptop out of his bag. "We've got five hours until they declare war. Our only chance is to fly under the confusion right after the declaration. I'll handle all the software, so you finish up the wiring."

"Okay." After I responded, I remembered what I'd been planning to say earlier and groused at him. "Hey, Takuya, what's up with that error message?"

"Huh?"

"The one for the version check. Don't make fun of me."

"The version check?" He cocked his head. "...Oh. Isn't that one of the parts you put together, three years back?"

"Huh?" I felt like I'd just fallen on my face. "I did?"

I started to suspect that maybe I had.

Takuya gave a lopsided smirk.

"That's the kind of guy you are. Idiot."

Takuya finished up the software in no time flat. He'd apparently had all the necessary components on his computer, but getting it done in a few hours was astounding.

"Stuff like this is easy," he said. "Once you know what you need to do, you just have to move your hands. The hard part is deciding what to do."

He's got that right, I thought.

I finished up the motor, hauled in the generator and charged the battery, hooked up the pump, and filled the tank with aviation fuel. Come to think of it, we'd left a whole lot of kerosene sitting up here for several years. That was not safe... The vibrations of the generator and the pump reverberated noisily, and I got more and more psyched up. There was energy here. A sense of life.

Outside, it was almost imperceptibly lighter. The sun hadn't come up yet.

I got into the cockpit and inspected the monitor and switches. I stepped on the pedals, checking the condition of the rudder, and moved the flaps and ailerons by turn. I heard the pleasant sound of the actuators.

This'll work, I thought. It's done...

Still gripping the stick, I sat there dazed for a little while.

From below me, I heard Takuya's voice. "Hiroki, c'mere a second."

"What?" I leaned over the edge of the cockpit.

"They've issued combat situation predictions for the Tsugaru Strait."

I climbed down from the plane and went over to the desk where Takuya was sitting.

"They're about what we predicted they would be."

His laptop displayed a map of Aomori and Hokkaido, with the Tsugaru Strait at its center. I peeked at it over Takuya's shoulder. It was shown with force deployment predictions displayed as percentages.

"The front line extends to the vicinity of the forty-second parallel, huh...?" Both the US-Japan alliance and the Union seemed to be assuming a scenario in which they'd intercept the enemy over the water. "The interior of Ezo, and the area around the tower in particular, seems to be a blank zone for the Union army."

"The erosion from the tower has taken out a lot of the land. That's probably why. How do you want to go in?"

"Let's see..."

I thought for a little while, then told him, pointing at the screen as I spoke. "I'll

use the jet engine and fly ultralow until we're over the strait. Then I'll slip through the battlefield, cross the forty-second parallel, and climb when I get to these mountains. Then cruise. How does that sound?"

"Not bad... Except you're going to be cutting right through an air combat hot spot."

"Yeah."

"Maybe it's a little late to mention it now, but if you get downed, it's all over. Are you sure about this?"

"They'll be on high alert before the fighting starts. We really can't fly then. We have to go while there's fighting going on around us. Use it as cover. There's no other way to do it, right?"

"Right," Takuya said immediately. "I'm impressed you've already got the guts for it."

"I may just be numb."

Takuya pointed at a different screen.

"When you reach the tower and Sawatari wakes up, the phase shift should reactivate. As soon as that happens, get out. Once you're ten kilometers from the tower, launch the seeker missile. All you have to do is let it out of the bay; it's programmed to fly to the tower autonomously... And then it'll all be over."

I remembered we'd grudgingly added the bay to the design a long time ago, when Mr. Okabe demanded it. He'd said he wanted to drop fliers from the sky, but thinking about it now, the intent was glaringly obvious.

Takuya pulled his chair back and gazed at the Velaciela, illuminated by the floodlights. From there, he could see the entire completed aircraft at once.

"We've got two whole hours left until the fighting starts. We got it done faster than I thought we would," he said.

I looked at the whole Velaciela, then examined each section separately. Each component contained the memories of the hard work spent on it. We were just a little late, but we were keeping the promise we'd made to ourselves. Now we just had to fulfill the promise we'd made to her.

Suddenly, the strangeness of it welled up within me.

“Don’t you think it’s weird? Ordinarily, you’d at least wonder if it’ll really fly, right? But I’ve never once thought that.”

Takuya replied coolly. “We designed it to fly, and we built it to fly. Of course it’s gonna fly.”

“I do feel better hearing it from you.”

“Says the guy who’s never been nervous. What are you even talking about?”

We built it to fly, so it would. What a wonderful sentiment.

We never thought that what we’d made might not fly. It wasn’t possible.

That’s what it means to have power—it means there’s nothing to fear.

“Hey, Hiroki, can I ask you something? This is a wild guess, or a hunch, but...”

“What?”

“You can play the violin, can’t you?”

“What, I called it?!” Takuya cackled. With his laughter in my ears, I sullenly took out Sayuri’s violin and tuned it.

Incredibly, it barely needed tuning at all. Its sound was pure and sweet. Just a few little tweaks was all it took. The violin had been suspended here as well. Time had stopped for it, too.

Takuya sat down on the floor, letting the stove toast his left side. I stood halfway between the Velaciela and Takuya, looking toward the Velaciela as I warmed up.

“Do us a favor and look over here.”

“Shut up.”

When I turned around, Takuya was wearing a very sunny expression.

“Do you want applause?”

“Just zip it and listen.”

With that carefree smile on his face, I briefly saw him as he’d been three years ago.

I inhaled, exhaled, and then, with my back to the Velaciela, I started playing.

First I played “When You Wish Upon a Star.” It was a simple tune, but a good one. I liked it. That was enough to let me get to know the quirks of Sayuri’s violin. It was the first time I’d ever played a violin that wasn’t silent.

Then I played a few recent J-pop hits. I listened to quite a lot of FM radio, so I was surprisingly familiar with them. While I was at it, I played an old British rock song, too.

Nocturne no. 20 in C-sharp Minor, chosen from Chopin.

I started wanting to try a playful piece, and I switched over to jazz violin. The atmosphere changed dramatically. The melody was complicated, and I could feel my own fingers working vigorously. It felt good.

I was completely absorbed.

There’s something wonderful about live sound. You radiate it with your whole body, and it becomes waves echoing in the atmosphere. I could feel the sound issuing from my chin.

I became sound itself.

Finally, I played that piece.

Sayuri’s melody. “A Distant Calling Voice”...

It was a tune I’d played over and over. By now, I could play it perfectly. I’d grown far better than Sayuri had been on that day. It was a little sad, actually.

For some reason, it felt like I was playing it for the first time.

Was this song always so beautiful...?

Light from outside had begun stealing in through the gaps between the badly fitted boards in the roof and walls. The sun wouldn’t show itself for a little while longer, but the sky was probably glowing already.

Suddenly, Takuya’s face crumpled. Back then, I didn’t know what had happened to him over the past three years.

On the sofa, Sayuri was still asleep.

Memories of the three of us walking through the field replayed on the screen

of my mind.

Sayuri was carrying her violin case on her back, walking cheerfully in front of Takuya and me, turning to look back from time to time.

“I’ve always felt like...like I was going to lose something,” she’d said.

Right now, dimly I had the same feeling.

I played.

I closed my eyes.

Outside, I was sure it was still snowing. White flakes were falling over the platforms of the abandoned station.

Over the station building.

Morning light lanced in through the holes in the rotting walls and floor of the pedestrian bridge.

I visualized the scene I knew lay outside.

Beautiful.

Beautiful.

I love you.

Then we heard the first report of the declaration of war.

8

We settled Sayuri into the back seat of the Velaciela, securing her with the seat belt.

The two of us pushed the aircraft along. We’d built the plane on top of a wheeled trolley, and the trolley was on a set of tracks that ran all the way into the hangar. That meant moving it was relatively simple. We were going to use the trolley in lieu of a catapult.

We opened the hangar’s big doors as far as they’d go, exposing the plane to the dawn air.

As we moved the plane along the tracks, we looked at the sky. It was red near

the horizon. Higher up, it was nearly dark gray.

At the track switch, we executed a switchback, turning completely around. We moved the Velaciela to the end of the straight set of rails we were using as a runway, then locked the wheels.

Leaning my upper body into the cockpit, I turned on the ignition. The engine came to life, filling the air with its distinctive blend of a shriek and a roar. It seemed as if that alone might be enough to wake Sayuri.

By that point, we weren't talking much. Neither of us was in the habit of engaging in unnecessary chatter to reemphasize our solidarity or whatever.

I climbed into the cockpit. The back seat, where Sayuri was, had a backrest, but the front seat didn't. We'd meant to put one in, but when we'd moved the back console up to join the front and have everything in one place, we'd taken the backrest out to facilitate the work. The g-forces during takeoff might make my balance a bit unstable.

In exchange, if I glanced over my shoulder, Sayuri's face was right there.

Takuya and I took one last wordless look at Sayuri: me from the seat, and him standing on the boarding ladder.

He closed the sliding canopy. Then he climbed down to the ground, removed the ladder, and moved away from the plane. He was just watching now. He didn't say "Go," and he gave no signals.

I looked ahead. The straight rails stretched away.

And at the end of that line, the tower loomed.

On the ocean in front of the tower, there was a swarm of intermittent flashes of light. Combat.

I looked up. A formation of fighter jets was etching contrails across the round sky, like claw marks.

I couldn't tell the difference between the vibration of the engine and my own trembling. Feeling the numbness of anxiety in my palms, I pushed up the throttle. The engine throbbed.

I needed a signal for myself.

“Let’s go,” I said, though my voice was drowned out by the roar.

I unlocked the wheels. Its strength unleashed, the jet engine howled.

There was an abrupt initial lurch, a bit like a roller coaster. Since there was no seat to catch my back, I leaned forward.

We taxied down the rails. The scenery flowed past me, ahead of me one moment and behind me the next. We put on speed, and my field of vision narrowed. Momentum was pulling my body backward.

The cliff was right in front of us—

I squeezed the right-hand lever as hard as I could, and there was a jolt underneath us: The blast devices had activated, separating the trolley and the aircraft.

I knew instinctively that the ground was gone. The Velaciela left the rails and began running along the transparent tracks of the atmosphere. I could physically feel the overwhelming vulnerability.

The ridgeline of Mt. Hakamagoshi sank below us, and the clouds came down from above. Everything I could see seemed to be descending. A mighty wind buffeted the canopy from the front.

Once again, I had that feeling I might never be able to go back to the place I’d left; a sense of relinquishing, a sense of liberation.

We were flying.

The flight of this jet wasn’t elegant at all. I bore up under the rattling as best I could, but my whole body was being scrambled. My guts were being shaken around so bad I felt like I might throw up. I started worrying that my brain might break. The worst part was the vibration in my eyeballs. I gripped the stick so hard I couldn’t feel my hand. Of course, that made the vibration that much worse, but I couldn’t afford not to. The plane seemed ready to fall apart at any moment. The joins in the canopy rattled audibly. I thought of place after place, wondering whether our work had been sloppy on any of them. If even one of them was loose, we’d break apart starting there. I fought the impulse to pull back the throttle, and the Velaciela kept flying at full speed. We crossed the mountain. The land ended, and the sea spread before us.

The sea, huh?

It took me time to register that we were over the ocean. Mist hung over the water.

I wanted to cross this sea—

Gradually, I pushed the stick forward and down, and we lost altitude. I flew just above the surface of the water, low enough that the plane's belly might graze the water. I didn't have the leeway to look behind me, but I was sure we were sending up waves. The kickback from the water hit us, and the Velaciela tried to buck up again. Without slowing our speed at all, I kept the Velaciela's head down by force. On reflex, I leaned forward.

The plane grew wet with the vapor from the water.

I looked ahead. In the distance, I saw several black ship silhouettes. Since we were so far away, they looked small, but the battleships were enormous. Lines of fire were flying around them, this way and that. Lights that looked like sparks streaked toward the sky in diagonal lines in rapid succession. I imagined Gatling guns spitting fire and missiles launched slowly from fixed rocket launchers. From a distance, though, they looked like the lights of small domestic fireworks. I consulted the display on the monitor, then flew along a route that would let me avoid them.

A terrible feeling raced through me, and I looked up.

...Right into the middle of a dogfight.

Gray and navy-blue fighter jets were locked in aerial combat. A swarm of fighter jets were zipping around like flies in the summer. I ducked involuntarily, and I might have made some sort of noise.

The Velaciela's stealth was pretty good. As long as they didn't physically spot us, we'd be fine. Besides, the planes would be too busy to bother with the Velaciela...

That was what I told myself.

Two jets plunged toward us from the sky's zenith, plummeting straight down. A MiG was glued to the tail of an F-23. The F-23 flipped right in front of me,

climbing rapidly. The MiG followed and launched an air-to-air missile. It looked like one carnivorous fish taking aim at another fish, then biting into it.

Just before the missile struck, the targeted “fish” flapped its rudders frenetically, like a living thing in the throes of death. The F-23 exploded right over my route. The explosion was heavy and thick, and the thin threads of smoke looked so solid it seemed as if you could touch them. It looked like the video of the space shuttle explosion I’d seen once.

I flew, avoiding the scattered fragments of the plane that pelted down like hail. Still, fine bits of wreckage knocked and clanked against the fuselage.

Just then, our nose struck something.

The canopy went red, blocking my view. Only after that did I register the sensation that the plane had struck something soft. That time, I screamed.

My eyes were squinted nearly closed, and I cringed down, but even so, I kept flying. I just kept going. The wind pressure gradually swept the thick red liquid away until I could see again. Even after the wind had rinsed off all traces of the blood, I couldn’t breathe normally.

I shouted a wordless cry and let its power raise my head.

Something nostalgic came into view.

“It’s land...”

By the time I murmured the words, we’d already crossed the coastline and were looking down over the terrain of Hokkaido.

I raised the stick. Fixing it in that upright position, I gazed at the air currents absently, but with a sense of reverence.

The Velaciela continued to rise into the distant upper reaches of the sky, above the clouds.

We’d reached what lay beyond the end of the world.

9

I was surrounded by pure blue. I love that color. If there was an omnipotent

designer who created the world, they were a genius for coming up with the idea of having white clouds floating in a blue sky. There was no haze or smoke now. All that was around me was perfectly clear air.

There was no noise or shaking anymore, either. I'd cut the throttle.

Without a pause, I squeezed the other throttle lever, the one that controlled the superconducting motor's output. I released the lock, then slowly pushed it up.

The long blades that were diagonally above the cockpit split in two. At a glance, they looked like the main wings, but they were hardly involved in lift generation at all. With a *clack*, the two blades twisted, forming pitch angles, then began to rotate in opposition to each other.

It was a double-layered counter-rotating propeller. I'd switched over from jet propulsion to the reciprocating engine.

This is what I wanted to do...

The propellers spun slowly, by turns, stirring the air and pushing it behind us.

The motor made almost no sound. Unless I listened very carefully, I couldn't hear it.

It was so quiet up here, in the midst of a stunningly blue sky.

If I shifted my gaze to the side slightly, I could peek down at the world below. There was nothing there. I wasn't on the ground. All that was under my feet was transparent air. It was a perfectly natural thing, but the realization frightened me. The land of Ezo was far, far below; it spread out smoothly, like an aerial photo. On the rudder pedals, my feet grew cold. There was nothing underneath me. Or under this seat carrying all my weight...

I suddenly couldn't take it anymore, and I looked behind me. Sayuri's chest was slowly rising and falling. I could hear her soft breathing. I sighed with relief. For some reason, the mere thought that I wasn't alone calmed me down.

I opened a map on the monitor and confirmed our current position.

Wiping my palms on my jeans, I got a better grip on the stick. Then I slowly tipped it to the right. The Velaciela gradually banked that way, and I raised the

nose to change directions.

Toward the tower.

It was right there, so close I almost reached out for it.

It was the tower.

It grew bigger and closer without giving me a chance to rein in the feelings welling up. It was far, far more enormous than I'd imagined. The little Velaciela reached the round, pitch-black phase shift territory, and it looked just like it had in the aerial photograph Takuya had shown me. I flew over the blackness, trying to get even closer.

I had come to the tower.

It was huge. Gargantuan.

I hadn't been able to tell from a distance, but the tower was shaped like a square pillar. An octagonal one, technically—the corners were beveled off. Its surfaces were mirrored, too, reflecting the clouds and the blue of the sky.

Something worked its way up from the neighborhood of my throat. The inside of my nose began to hurt, and I looked down. The liquid that had pooled in my eyes shifted, trickling out. I gritted my teeth, trying to hold it back, but that was when the liquid began flowing in earnest.

What was this?

What could it be?

The tower was right there.

I'd flown here.

I pushed the stick down to the left and circled the tower, again and again. When the Velaciela entered the tower's shadow, it got pitch-black, while the tower became a clear mirror, reflecting the white clouds and the white Velaciela. We came out into the sunlight, and the tower turned pure-white. Even the cockpit filled with the bleaching light, and my mind was scorched white. We kept circling. Traveling around the tower. Little by little, darkness. Mirror. A pause. Little by little, light...then darkness.

I climbed, little by little, sketching a spiral. As I circled, I looked at the plane, at myself, reflected in the mirror. We'd reached maximum altitude, and yet the tower still rose higher. The Velaciela didn't give a good view above me, so I raised the nose, letting myself get a look that way. I still couldn't see the top of the tower. It went on and on, into the sky. It grew thinner, hazier, and finally disappeared into the vanishing point.

I wanted to keep circling the tower like this forever. I didn't think I'd ever get tired of it.

I wanted to show it to Takuya, too.

...And to Sayuri.

"Sayuri."

I turned toward the back seat. Sayuri was sleeping quietly.

In her sleep, had she found these white wings among that forest of brown towers?

Sayuri. We're here. We made it to you.

"Look, Sayuri," I said. "It's the place we promised."

Sayuri didn't respond. I took my left hand off the throttle, folding it over my right hand, which was on the stick. I looked down. I closed my eyes.

And I prayed.

"Gods..."

I prayed. Religion had never really resonated with me. Here, though, in the sea of blue, before this white monument, I couldn't have been more reverent. The word *gods* had slipped out naturally, but it didn't have to be gods. I prayed to something with strength far greater than my own, visualizing something huge. Something even bigger than the tower. I pictured the round blue Earth, then the black space in which that Earth floated, all alone. I envisioned the enormous gears impassively driving the movement of a host of celestial bodies, creaking in their revolutions, then I moved my imagined eyes behind those gears to a different universe beyond. I prayed to all these things. The eyes of my heart became a pointed obelisk piercing through multiple universes. A tower.

“Please make Sayuri wake up... Please.”

The Velaciela continued to circle the mirrored tower. The tower reflected the sky, the clouds, and occasionally the Velaciela. The tower’s surface. Its angles. Surface. Clouds. Sky. Velaciela...

Suddenly, I felt dizzy.

The Velaciela reflected in the tower changed direction, flying toward me.

It filled my field of vision.

White...

I was buried in that white.

I was...

I was drawn inside the tower, Velaciela and all.

*

What I’m going to write next is something I didn’t remember until much, much later.

Several years afterward, something brought the memory back to me, like a rusted lock that had unexpectedly opened.

I’m not even certain whether I can call it a physical experience. Whatever it was, I forgot it right after it happened.

I was flying through a dull-colored sky, like sun-bleached wallpaper. It reminded me of the walls in the dorm where I’d lived for three years.

There was a forest of towers. Their designs weren’t elegant, like the Ezo tower’s. They were twisted in complicated ways, formed of a material like unglazed pottery or sun-dried brick. But there were no seams. They were all one piece. Complex patterns were drawn on their surfaces with red dye.

The air smelled a bit like a tightly sealed library.

Gradually, the towers were losing their color. They were turning translucent, like holographs, and disappearing. The forest of towers was on the verge of vanishing, as if it had never been anything more than an illusion.

At some point, I’d left the cockpit. I wasn’t anywhere. No—right now, I was

Sayuri. I was both myself and her. Our dreams mingled; the towers mingled. This was a place where countless towers met, a terminal station for parallel worlds. All the worlds were human dreams, and those dreams converged at this singularity. In this land of origins, I was Sayuri, and Sayuri was me. Because of that, I could understand her with crystalline clarity.

Sayuri was standing on top of one of the towers.

In the faded sky, her eyes found the double counter-rotating wings.

“Those wings,” she murmured. “The Velaciela...”

She could feel that she was about to wake up.

It wouldn’t be long now.

The towers were losing their opacity more rapidly. They lost more and more color. They turned translucent, then clear, then vanished.

“The dreams are disappearing... Oh, I see...”

She understood.

“I know what it is I’m going to lose.”

It was...

“This feeling. These feelings, right now.”

That was...

“...No!”

Her emotions burst. Denial. Refusal. She rejected it with everything she was, and the tower’s color began to return. The color of earth grew more vivid, into the color of baked clay.

“Sayuri!” I yelled.

I was trying to stop her. She couldn’t do that. That was what I thought, but at the same time, I was her. I was the one who was rejecting this. If it meant losing these feelings, the me who was Sayuri didn’t want to wake up. She didn’t want to open her eyes. She didn’t want to lose this miraculous dream.

“Hiroki came for me. I understand everything about him. That’s enough. I can

lose anything else, just not that,” she pleaded. “There’s nothing here, but this place has everything. If you’ll stay, Hiroki, I want to stay here forever.”

Her voice was thick with emotion. It was my voice as well.

“I was always alone. Even before I was trapped in here, I was always on my own. The world is so beautiful, but it always seemed like I was the only one who couldn’t experience the happiness and comfort.

“Sometimes I thought the world might be wrong somehow. Like maybe it wasn’t real. Maybe there was a world out there where everything was as it should be. I wasn’t left out; I was a part of all sorts of things. Maybe I wanted to rewrite this world.

“Hiroki, listen,” Sayuri said. “This place has every sort of dream there is. I don’t want to go back to where I was. I want to go somewhere new. *I don’t want to forget the dream.*”

All the towers began to sing—loudly and powerfully.

Sayuri had the towers at her command. They served her. The shape of the world was at her fingertips. The color of one of the towers grew even brighter. Then it began shining as a bloom of piercing light grew bigger and bigger at its top.

White light covered my vision.

And the world was remade.

That world was nearly the same as the one Sayuri and I had been in before. Meaning it was a little different.

Japan wasn’t divided and ruled by the United States and the Union. There was no Union superstate in that world at all. A federation had been built around Russia at one time, but it had already collapsed. Hokkaido was, and always had been, Japanese soil. No one had been separated from anyone. Mr. Okabe lived with his wife. When we went to Emishi Manufacturing to visit, his wife served us tea. There was no National Railways, either. It had been split up and privatized, and it was now known by the cryptic name “JR.” A multitude of unprofitable lines all over the country had been closed, but luckily, the Tsugaru Line was still running.

I loved the rural landscapes of the Tsugaru Peninsula that you could see from that train. I gazed through its windows at the view. Of course, there was no tower. I spent my boyhood without it there to inspire me.

At the abandoned station that beautiful summer, Takuya and Sayuri and I built an aircraft—a hydroplane with a reciprocating engine.

I took the front of the two-seater cockpit, and Takuya took the back. The propellers pulled the plane, and the pontoons rose lightly from the surface of the water.

Sayuri was running along the bank of the lake, happily chasing after us.

No one was excluded.

There wasn't a trace of sorrow to be seen.

There was no tower.

Sayuri wasn't forced to go to sleep.

The airplane flew.

The three of us could stay ourselves forever. I didn't go to Tokyo. Takuya didn't need to join the Aomori Army College.

And so...

I didn't meet Rika.

He didn't meet Maki Kasahara.

"This isn't right, Sayuri."

I climbed out of the reciprocating plane and took off my helmet.

Then I looked straight at Sayuri.

I was standing in front of her. We were at the top of the clay tower. The gritty sky undulated, acquiring stripes like marble. Sayuri's small hands were clenched tightly, pressed to her chest. She always did that when she was struggling to accept that she couldn't win a battle or when she was contemplating pain.

The Velaciela wheeled soundlessly around us. It was banking, so its smooth back was constantly turned toward us. Sayuri and I were in the center of a circle

drawn by the Velaciela.

“I know your pain,” I said. “And you know mine. That’s exactly what gives this place value. Don’t you agree? Everything—the good and the bad, the pain and the hardship and the bad luck and the sadness—it all belongs to us. We can’t erase the pain we’ve suffered, or that we’ve inflicted on others. All of those things brought the two of us here.”

“But...”

“It’s awful to be forgotten. Isn’t it, Sayuri?”

“But then—!” Sayuri said. “If I wake up, I’ll forget how I feel now! I know everything about you, Hiroki, and you know all about me. You’re in me; I’m in you. We’re everything; we’re a part of each other. We don’t need anything else... And that’s all I ever wanted. If I wake up, this will be gone. Here, I don’t need anything but you. I know you feel the same. Out there, we can’t hold on to this. You’ll forget, too, you know.”

“Well, it is a dream, after all.”

“No...”

“Sayuri, you know it, too. I am you. That’s why I think you should wake up.”

“But...”

“It’s all right.” I smiled at her. “We’ll find it all again, piece by piece. It’ll be fine.”

The towers around Sayuri vanished one after another. They didn’t fade away the way they had before. They turned into sparks of light, bursting and vanishing instantaneously.

“But please, gods...” At the top of the lone remaining tower, Sayuri prayed. “Please, after I wake up, even if it’s just for a moment...let me keep this feeling.”

The Velaciela sketched a larger circle, coming toward us.

“I have to tell Hiroki. He has to know how special our connection was in the dream. He has to know how much I longed for him in this deserted world and how much he longed for me... Please!”

I was in the white Velaciela.

“I don’t need anything else. I just want to tell Hiroki how much I’ve loved him until now.”

The Velaciela grew until it was all she could see.

“I’m begging you, even if it’s just for one moment.”

Everything was white—

“Let these feelings—”

And our memories of the events inside the tower were wiped clean.

*

“Gods...,” I prayed. “Please make Sayuri wake up... Please.”

The Velaciela continued circling the mirrored tower. The blue of the sky was reflected in its facets.

The morning sun emerged from the pure-white clouds, casting intense light over Sayuri’s face.

I felt a little premonition, almost like fear.

I locked the stick and twisted around to gaze at Sayuri in the back seat. She was all I saw.

The strong morning light was melting her.

And slowly...

She opened her eyes.

My eyes widened, too.

My heart stopped. Started. Stopped again.

I put a hand out toward Sayuri and touched her cheek very lightly with the tip of my middle finger.

“Sayuri.”

Light bloomed from the center of the tower.

It was a piercing silver light, like a blade. Powerful and savage.

“Hiroki...”

The whole tower began to shine. The light swelled in seemingly infinite intensity, and then it emitted a shock wave all along its length. It had absolutely no effect on the plane, but the quality of the air changed.

The tower had awakened, too.

I didn't care. I gazed at Sayuri. I noticed her slightest movements. The trembling of her eyelids. Her constricting pupils. Her fingertips. Her breath.

On the ground, the black hole was growing darker.

The tower shone brighter and brighter, and a spiral of light particles began twining around it.

I could physically feel the black area expanding rapidly as it eroded the earth. Another universe was creeping out from the base of the tower before our very eyes. It crumbled rock, melted soil, building up vast power.

Hokkaido was on the brink of being swallowed into the void opening in its heart.

The rest of the world probably wouldn't be far behind.

We kept circling around the rumbling tower.

I'd fallen still, with my hand on Sayuri's cheek. Had her mind returned? I felt uneasy. I didn't know what effect three years of sleep had had on her awareness. Did she even recognize me?

“Sayuri,” I said, calling to her.

She gave a little sob. Then tears began to spill and overflow like water pumped from a well. Her cheeks were so wet I worried she might get dehydrated.

“I...”

She took my hand.

“There was something I had to tell you... Something very important...”

She clung to my hand. She held it as though she thought I'd disappear if she didn't...but apparently she couldn't muster much strength yet, and I felt almost

no pressure from her grip.

“It’s gone...”

Her chest and shoulders spasmed. She began to cry out loud. Her sobs wouldn’t stop, and neither did her tears. “It’s gone...,” she said again. Her own words seemed to torment her, and she cried even harder, like a child.

“It’s all right,” I told her. “You’re awake. We’ll find it all again.”

Sayuri raised her head.

The Velaciela was flying soundlessly. We were there, she and I, on our promised wings, in the promised place.

I thought, *I should smile.*

“Welcome home, Sayuri.”

10

I brought the plane down. As we got closer, the darkness below us grew. Once we were low enough, I stopped the propellers and switched over to jet propulsion.

We flew south, away from the tower. I didn’t fly at full speed, the way I had on the way in. We were in a hurry, but I wanted to disturb Sayuri as little as possible.

The navigation assistance program told me it was time. The alarm that meant we were more than ten kilometers from the tower sounded quietly, twice. One button. It was an operation so simple it was almost anticlimactic. The bay in the plane’s belly opened, and a red-painted cylinder dropped out.

The seeker missile free-fell for about a second. Then there was a flash of light from its tail, and it began to fly, trailing a white thread of smoke. It made fine adjustments to its direction, then sketched an arc toward the tower we’d just left behind.

A new light was born in the tower’s middle.

The explosion was a warm gold color. In an instant, the tower was in flames.

Fire spread up and down it, expanding from the spot where the missile had struck. The burning tower was a deep crimson.

There was a roar, and the shock wave swept through while I wrestled the plane under control. I felt a weird sense of déjà vu, but I had several more important things to think about. Sayuri had her forehead pressed against my back. She was clinging to my jacket, still crying silently. Maybe her fingers were still weak; she kept grasping at my jacket, trying to get a better grip on it.

We reached the strait. Fighter jets were still streaking every which way. Lines of fire from the ships still created orange stitch marks in the sky. We flew right through the middle of it, without trouble. The tower was a pillar of fire for quite a long time, but eventually, it burned out. The soft, spiral structures in its interior were laid bare, then rapidly scattered by the wind.

The black area had stopped growing, I believed. The world wouldn't be swallowed up by the void. To me, what was more important was that Sayuri would never be trapped in that unnatural sleep again.

When we got back to the abandoned station, Takuya was gone.

11

That's the end of my story.

I've written everything I wanted to write, at least. In the beginning, I'd planned to leave everything after this point unwritten, but I won't be able to do that. Once you've taken flight, you have to land somewhere. That's true for planes, for people, and for writing as well.

I've already told you that Takuya disappeared. In the ten-plus years since then, I haven't seen him once. Five years ago, he sent that journal I mentioned, but that's all. Like the cautious type he is, he'd used a box knife to neatly cut out all the pages that talked about anything except those three years of high school. The parcel had been sent from the Union.

By chance, I had an opportunity to meet Maki Kasahara, just once. She was lovely. I could imagine a smile would suit her well, but she never smiled around me. We exchanged polite greetings and parted civilly. She told me she hadn't

seen Takuya since then, either.

I got in touch with Rika Mizuno first thing. I called her cell, but it was turned off, so I dialed her home phone. Rika answered.

“I’ve decided to try going it alone,” she said. “I’ve been taking this time to think, and I believe I’ll be able to land. I need to learn to get by on my own, without depending on someone else to keep me connected.” She fell silent for a little while, considering what to say next, then spoke again. “But, Fujisawa, I can thank you for that way of thinking. Watching you made me want to tackle my own world head-on. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that.”

She actually thanked me. I was the one who owed her thanks. Rika had been the one who’d reclaimed me. Her presence had shown me the way to my rebirth.

Even after she hung up, for about five minutes, I listened to the muted tone of the dead line. I couldn’t bear my feelings, so I directed them at the phone. I think that’s probably when I developed a decisive hatred of those devices.

In a world where our promised place no longer existed, Sayuri and I began to live our lives again.

I got the results of the entrance exams I’d taken before going to Aomori. I hadn’t made it into the national university that had been my first choice, but I’d gotten into my second choice, a private school. I went back to Tokyo, got my stuff together, and moved out of the dorm. Then I enrolled at the university, immediately submitted a leave-of-absence form, and returned to Aomori. After that, Sayuri and I began living together on our own.

Both Sayuri’s mind and her body were as fragile as they came, and her family had vanished without a trace. We heard a rumor that they were in America, but we couldn’t find out any more than that. The only option was for me to protect Sayuri myself, and I didn’t want to let anyone else touch her. Although I won’t go into details, we had no trouble covering our living expenses. I guarded Sayuri, soothed her, talked with her, held her. Nothing else really mattered much.

Sayuri didn’t remember a single one of the dreams she’d had during her long slumber.

For two years, we lived on our own.

Aomori was cold, but living there felt right. However, for a fairly long time, the absence of the tower seemed odd to me. Every time I looked north and found that empty spot in the scenery, I felt perplexed.

“Why?” I murmured sometimes.

In the third year, I moved to Tokyo with Sayuri and started school again.

By then, to all appearances, Sayuri had recovered completely. When we first began living together, she’d been terrified of falling asleep, but lately, even that symptom had cleared up. Now she was just a beautiful twenty-one-year-old woman whose sleep was a little irregular. Twenty-one...

For some reason, I couldn’t seem to get used to the fact of her age.

I’d turned twenty-one myself, so it only made sense that she had reached that milestone as well. There was nothing odd about it. And yet the sense of wrongness just wouldn’t go away. It was an adult age. I was an adult and was becoming more of one. I’d begun to acquire enough power that calling me a grown-up was perfectly accurate. It happens to everyone. It’s completely fair.

For some reason, though, the fact that she’d turned twenty-one seemed like a grave injustice.

She was kind enough to love me. She always made sure to be there when I got home. When I walked through the door, she’d come to meet me, hug me gently with her fragile strength, and just stay there for a little while. It was as if she was trying to confirm something that couldn’t be put into words, then give it to me. Every time, I’d put my hands on her shoulders and stand there until she was satisfied.

In our everyday life, she was mine alone, and I was hers. It was utter bliss, a quiet, tranquil, calm happiness. The storm of emotions she’d stirred up in me once on the train, a long time ago, never awoke again. We fulfilled each other in very quiet ways.

Every so often, the fact that our lives were so peaceful frightened me. Maybe it was because before now, I’d always been pushed into motion by one thing or another. Sometimes I felt as if I was slowly drying out. Either that or like ice

cream, melting...

Every time I got that feeling, I'd touch her, pull her close, and bury my face in her hair. I'd lost many things on my way here. Now, Sayuri was all I had left. She was the one tiny snow crystal left in the palm of my hand. I protected it there, treasuring it gently so as not to break it.

A few odd things happened.

One had to do with airplanes.

It was a Sunday, and Sayuri and I were out for a walk in a certain park in Kouenji. The weather was fine, and the park was crowded with people. We strolled down paths through the greenery and leaned against a fence, watching the turtles swim in the pond. Then we sat on the lawn, basking in the sun.

Three grade-school boys were flying paper airplanes. One of them just couldn't get his to fly. Even when he tried to catch a breeze with it, the nose would tilt down every time and plunge into the ground. The plane came down right next to me, and I picked it up.

"Hiroki, can you fix it?" Sayuri asked.

I suspected the problem was just that its center of gravity was off, but I didn't want to deal with airplanes much anymore. After the day of the war, I'd lost all interest in them. The time to fly had passed, and now it was time to stay where we were. I just shook my head, then tried to give the plane back to the boy.

From beside me, Sayuri reached out and took it. She spent a little while examining it from different angles. Then she took a wire clip out of her hair and slipped it onto the center of the plane. She raised it and softly sent it riding on a breeze. Catching the air current, the plane flew magnificently straight.

"Well done..." I was impressed.

Suddenly, Sayuri looked taken aback. From her expression, she couldn't seem to believe what she'd done. She considered the matter seriously, pinching her fingernails between her fingertips.

"How did I know to do that?" she asked. "I've never even made a paper airplane before."

Another thing was the cat.

The apartment we'd rented was on the first floor of a five-story building, and it had a small garden. It was so tiny that a few potted plants were enough to fill it entirely.

At the beginning of autumn, a cat started to visit the garden. It was a gray-and-white cat, with patches of gray that came down on either side of its nose like a mask, and it was very young. We guessed it had been born that spring.

When I tossed a peeled chestnut to it, just to see what it would do, it timidly approached, sniffed at it, then began to eat it, delighted. Then it started coming by for a visit once every couple of days. It wasn't long before it got used to us and began coming into the apartment through the patio door.

Sayuri doted on the cat. Before long, we had a new resident. The building didn't allow pets, but we ignored that.

The cat got attached to her but never really took to me, for some reason. It seemed to me that the two of them had formed some sort of understanding. The cat would flatten itself on the ground in the garden and stare at a little winged insect that had come to rest on a flowerpot, watching for its chance. Then it would try to pounce on it. Sayuri often watched fondly. The cat generally failed, and then she'd laugh like a little bell.

After about two months, the cat disappeared.

One day, Sayuri and I went to a nearby supermarket to do some shopping. We were planning to be gone for only an hour, so we locked up without putting the cat outside. When we got back, it was gone. We searched the whole apartment. We thought it might have gotten itself trapped in a corner somewhere, so we moved all the furniture and checked. We even dragged everything out of the closet. But we found nothing.

I insisted that that wasn't even possible, but Sayuri easily accepted the reality.

"It was just that time," she said. She seemed a little lonely, but considering how fond she was of it, I thought she was awfully calm.

A few days later, I woke in the middle of the night and realized she was silently crying. I rolled over and pulled her into a hug. She was trembling.

"I'm frightened," she said.

I told her there was nothing to be afraid of.

She didn't say anything.

"Hiroki."

One day near the end of that year, she told me, "I need to tell you good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

Our parting jumped out of nowhere.

"I don't think it's right for me to stay here with you like this. I think I need to be on my own."

"Why?" I asked, stunned.

"Because I lean on you. I let you handle so much. When I'm with you, even if I can't walk on my own, you'll walk for me."

It was so sudden that I was confused. "Listen, if there's something I need to change..."

"No, it's not your fault. Not at all." She shook her head, and her long hair rippled. "I've started wanting to make my own decisions, to live on my own."

I was still confused, but dimly I realized that I was about to lose her.

"Over these past few years, you've always protected me," she went on, speaking as if she was carefully untangling a thread, then laying it out. "And it feels wonderful to be so cherished, but it also means you are the only point of contact I have with the world now. You're strong, and you can do everything; I can't do anything. I don't think that's okay. I need to expose myself to the world instead of keeping myself shut away inside you."

"Listen, though," I said. "Even if that is true, do you really have to go so suddenly? If we think it over together..."

"No, I'm sure that wouldn't work. For me, I mean."

Gently, quietly, she laid out her thread for me.

"I think I need to become my own person. Somewhere else, without you. I

have to choose on my own and move ahead on my own, without relying on you. I think it's just that time. Unless I spread my wings and go now, I'll take the easy path and keep leaning on you forever. I want to become myself. I have to redeem those three years I was asleep...get back all the things I put on hold during the past six years. I have to take my time."

I was silent.

There was a time when I'd resolved to reclaim myself that way. I couldn't say anything else. I knew how she felt.

"I understand," I told her. My voice was hoarse. I didn't want to understand.

"I was so happy for the past three years. They were like a dream."

She smiled, although she looked as if she was about to cry.

"I never wanted to wake up."

She didn't let me help with all the tasks that needed to be done in order for her to leave. She took care of everything by herself. She'd been getting ready to do this for a while.

"Please don't ask for my contact information," she said when she'd gotten her things together and was about to leave the house.

"Why?"

"Because if I see you or hear your voice, I'll fall apart. That's what happens when you're alone."

"What are you going to do now?" I asked her.

Sayuri's face held faint traces of anxiety and a smile that was just as subtle.

"I'm going to be reborn," she said. "Listen. Don't think I don't love you. I'll always love you. When life hurts, I'll think of you. I'll imagine you walking, living on, under a distant sky, and it'll give me the strength to keep going. You do that, too, all right? I'm sure you'll never find it impossible to go on—but I hope you'll think of me living under my own strength every once in a while, somewhere in the world."

Every so often, I look up at the sky and think of her, living somewhere I don't

know.

And that's how I ended up on my own.

Everyone walks alone. It isn't just me.

No matter how often you claim you're not lonely,

it's certain you'll be lonely again.

That's all right, though, here in this place.

Burning all loneliness and grief together,

people advance down a transparent track.

(Miyazawa, "Koiwai Farm, Part 9")

Finally, I'll write about Mr. Okabe.

The year after Sayuri left, I got a single letter from him, as if he'd finally remembered. It was covered with multiple forwarding labels. The stamp was from a country whose name I'd never even heard of. No doubt he wasn't there anymore.

There was a photograph of Mr. Okabe and his wife in the same envelope. I don't really understand why; he probably wanted to brag about her. Sheesh, what a lovable dork. Mr. Okabe's wife was about his age, of course. She wasn't exactly young, but she had aged with grace. In fact, she was startlingly attractive.

After the war and the fall of the tower, Ezo had been returned to Japan.

On that winter day when we'd flown our plane, what we'd done had helped reunite this couple. There had been some meaning to it.

The idea was a comforting one.

Speaking of photographs...

I was cleaning up, preparing to move out of the apartment where I'd lived with Sayuri. The place was saturated with memories we'd made together, and staying there would have hurt. Sayuri had left a tremendous number of books in the apartment, so I'd decided to call a tradesman and have them take them. I was separating the books I'd leave from the books I planned to take when I

found it. Between the pages of one volume, there was a photo.

It was a picture of me, Takuya, and Sayuri, all together, back in middle school. It had been taken at the abandoned station; the tumbledown station building was behind us.

The moment I saw it, everything that had happened inside the tower resurfaced in my mind.

Why had I forgotten something so important?

Sayuri and I had been one then. We'd had each other, had been everything to each other.

That miracle was gone now.

Actually, the miracle was the fact that I'd remembered it at all. Sayuri probably hadn't, even now. This memory was one we hadn't been able to take with us. There was no need to make her remember. In fact, it would have been detrimental to her.

When an event has been completely forgotten, it may as well have never happened.

I was the only one remembering this nonexistent event. It shattered me. It was awful to be forgotten.

As I gazed at the photo, I felt unsettled.

When had this been taken?

I had no memory of posing for it. Had I simply forgotten?

The photo showed the three of us. Who had taken it? Had we used the self-timer? Maybe.

I thought of every object that had been around that abandoned station. Even the piled-up railroad ties and old bus tires and things like that. Had there been a place to set and stabilize a camera? I couldn't remember...

Still, the photo was here now.

I decided not to think about where it had come from.

Instead, I gazed at the three figures depicted there.

The indescribable joy on their faces struck right to my core. It wasn't that they were smiling. Sayuri had her head tilted to one side and looked a little troubled, while Takuya was looking away, acting as if photos were stupid. My expression was patently stiff. (I've always had trouble figuring out what to do with my face.)

However, there was a certain contentment in that picture. The world inside it was gentle and strong and full of nothing but good. There was nothing that could threaten them. Those three had nothing to fear. I held on to that picture as tight as I could, unable to move a muscle, and let that moment from a bygone summer stay with me for a long, long time.

[MASAKI ENOMOTO](#)

In his commercial debut, *Voices of a Distant Star* (2002), Makoto Shinkai told the story of a boy and girl whose souls sense each other even as they are separated, one on Earth and the other out in space. His next animated film was *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* (2004). In the aftermath of a war, an alternate-world Japan has been split into north and south halves. The Union, an enormous bloc of Communist nations, has built a mysterious tower in Ezo, the land formerly known as Hokkaido, and military tension is simmering between it and the Allied forces of the United States and Japan.

The protagonists of the story are middle-school students living in Tsugaru, the borderland. Hiroki Fujisawa and Takuya Shirakawa are classmates whose close friendship was sparked by their interest in aircraft, and they are immersed in designing and building their own plane. Their dream is to use it to fly to the Union's tower. Sayuri Sawatari, whom they both secretly harbor feelings for, joins them and christens the plane Velaciela. They promise to fly to the tower beyond the clouds together. However, Sayuri falls prey to a sleeping sickness with an unknown cause and suddenly vanishes. Unable to keep their promise, they stop working on the Velaciela.

Like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Ryuu Murakami's *The World Five Minutes from Now*, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* is an alternate-history sci-fi story that depicts a world that might have been. The Union's tower was developed and constructed as a device that observes information from parallel worlds and causes phase shifts. Its designer was Sayuri's grandfather. The relationship between the tower and the sleeping Sayuri gradually becomes clear.

While this novelization by Arata Kanoh faithfully follows the storyline of director Makoto Shinkai's film, it also stands alone as a novel. After the avant-

title (the prologue before the main story begins), director Shinkai's storyboard is composed of three parts: part one, which shows the trio's time together in middle school; part two, which depicts how Hiroki and Takuya spend their high school years apart; and part three, which reunites Hiroki and Takuya as they work to save Sayuri together. In this book, the avant-title is the prologue, part one is the Summer chapter, part two is the Sleep chapter, and part three is the Tower chapter.

Like *Voices of a Distant Star*, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* incorporates sci-fi elements. In it, the shape of the tower, positioned at the center of the tale, endlessly fascinates us. The concept of the beautiful, pure-white tower, a concentration of the best of the Union's science, has its origins in the basic idea and depiction of the tower in *Beyond the Tower*, a short manga Shinkai submitted in response to a request from Vol. 01 of the subculture critical magazine *Shingenjitsu (New Reality)* (Kadokawa Mook 156, Kadokawa Shoten).

Beyond the Tower is sixteen pages long, drawn in full color, and is currently the only Shinkai story manga you can pick up and read. (Reprinted in *Makoto Shinkai Walker—Lingering Light*, Kadokawa, 16.8.) The protagonist of the story is "I," a high school girl. In her third year of high school, "on a fine morning in June," instead of getting on the train to school, she plays hooky. Then, as her "goal for that entire day," she decides to walk to "the tower that's taller than the skyscrapers," which she "can always see clearly at the end of the elevated railroad." She's abandoned herself to the extraordinary in a break from routine, and she keeps making for the tower, feeling liberated. As she walks, her mind gradually turns inward. She feels uneasy about the future, and she vaguely muses, "I bet I'll find something that's perfect for me before too long." She finally reaches the tower, but they won't let her onto the property. "Suddenly, an emotion I don't understand wells up inside me." It's ten o'clock at night, and on a homebound train, she desperately fights back tears. Ultimately, she can't hold back the tears and cries on the train, delivering a poignant inner monologue.

What is shown here is the urgent appeal, the heart's cry, of a girl who feels estranged from the world. With its portrayal of the raw voice of a girl who is (or

thinks she has been) isolated from any relationships to everything and everyone around her, *Beyond the Tower* can be read as a prologue to *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*.

There are two elements that can be seen as connections to *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*. One is the presence of those landmark towers. In addition to being images that consolidate the landscapes around them, they are geographical landmarks. To Hiroki and the others, the Union's tower, which stands in Ezo and can be seen from the Tsugaru Peninsula, is "the place that looked close enough to touch and yet was beyond reach." It provokes adoration and awe and obsession, as a symbol. In *Beyond the Tower*, her little adventure to the tower gives "I" a temporary freedom. No sooner does she reach her destination than her buoyant feelings rapidly deflate, and she falls victim to an emotion she doesn't understand. This, then, is the second connection between that story and *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*.

The moment the goal is reached, it dissipates. When the promise is fulfilled, the promised place disappears. The problem is the question of what to do with yourself after you've achieved what you set out to do. The emotional stalemate that "I" experiences upon reaching the tower is something the three characters in *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*—Hiroki, Takuya, and Sayuri—experience as well. What governs the trio's actions is the fulfillment of the promise they made each other on the abandoned station platform in early July during their third year of middle school: in other words, flying Sayuri to the tower in the Velaciela. *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* is the tale of just that—a promise. Sayuri's illness grows serious, the promise is put on hold, and their relationship temporarily ruptures; however, they overcome the opposition and miscommunication, and their drive to make that promise a reality brings them back together. The relationship drama that closely follows their daily lives is intimately linked to the standoff between the Union and the US-Japan alliance, as well as the international situation. The narrative energy in this book is generated by a seamless fusion of the small-scale "actions of individuals" and the large-scale "history."

As a rule, novelizations are considered part of a media mix, whose goal is to take original visual works such as films, manga, anime, and games and

transpose them into a novel's mode of expression. The original work is the main thing, while the novel is seen as secondary, an auxiliary expression. Arata Kanoh's book is a novelization of director Shinkai's film, and yet it does more than simply trace the scenario and story of the original.

Broadly speaking, Kanoh does two things in this book. The first is to complement the story of the original movie. Film is a time-dependent mode of expression: The length of the work is predetermined. If the movie is two hours long, the audience takes two hours to watch it. In contrast, novels leave the audience in the pilot's seat. The reader can read the book whenever they like, wherever they like, and take as much time doing it as they want to. The amount of plot-level information that can be included in novels is also overwhelmingly greater.

The novelization of *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* incorporates a lot of detail that complements the original. For example, the fact that it was Sayuri who named the Velaciela with the meaning "white wings." The fact that, when Hiroki infiltrated the Uilta Liberation Front's hideout, and Mr. Okabe had him at gunpoint, Takuya saved him. The fact that Takuya faced off against Professor Tomisawa when he took Sayuri from the Aomori Army College facility. An effort is made to fill in the gaps in these and many other scenes that aren't depicted in the original film.

One more thing Kanoh does in this book is to drastically update the setting, composition, and story content of the original, as well as add new plots and ideas. In the Summer chapter, a large number of pages is used on the scenes spanning the time when Hiroki and Takuya meet as classmates in middle school and the time when they acknowledge themselves as "the ultimate team" through their work on their model airplane. In Section 11 of the Tower chapter, he tells what happened after the ending of the anime. Boldly incorporating the work of Kenji Miyazawa as a symbolic device was most likely Kanoh's idea as well.

One of the most important examples is the sequence of scenes shown in the Sleep chapter that revolve around Hiroki and his classmate Rika Mizuno. (In Makoto Shinkai's *5 Centimeters per Second*, when the protagonist Takaki is a working adult, a woman named Risa Mizuno makes an appearance as his lover.

The fact that only one syllable is different between these two names can stimulate the imagination.) In the original film, Rika's appearances are limited (her name isn't even stated), but in the novel, her role has been expanded until she is essentially a fourth main character.

In losing Sayuri, Hiroki has lost his life's purpose, and he leaves his hometown and begins high school in Tokyo. Aside from his trips between the school and his dorm, and concentrating on his studies, Hiroki is just letting life pass him by when Rika appears. After a certain event, the two of them become deeply involved with each other. However, their relationship stalls at the level of "more than friends, less than lovers." Hiroki is captivated by the Sayuri who appears in his dreams, and he isn't able to open his heart to Rika. As he agonizes privately and isolates himself, Rika despairs. Sayuri and Rika "show" Hiroki's feelings. Their strange three-way relationship is reminiscent of "I," Naoko, and Midori's relationship in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. The introverted Sayuri, who is confined within the walls of another world, is Naoko, while Rika, who veils her loneliness with a cute and aggressive attitude, is Midori. The tale begins from the perspective of Hiroki, now thirty-one, who is recalling "the memory of that special summer, sixteen years ago." The narrative form, in which the narrator recalls past events from a first-person perspective, is also like *Norwegian Wood*.

The camera angles in the original film show a mixture of third-and first-person perspectives, but the book is shown entirely from the first-person perspective of "I" (Hiroki). In Section 7 of the Sleep chapter, there is a line that says "That's why I'm writing these words." The book is presented as a memoir written by Hiroki. By adopting a metafictional structure, the question of *why Hiroki had to write a story like this one* becomes a story in its own right. We can read Kanoh's "criticism" of the original work in his method of presenting the story. As critical fiction, this book is placed in competition with the film.

The climax of this book is the scene where, in order to keep his promise to Sayuri, Hiroki flies her to the tower in the Velaciela. The tower and Sayuri have become one, and destroying the tower may endanger her life. The dilemma concisely summarized in Takuya's line, "It's either save Sawatari or save the world," is resolved by the courageous choice to save Sawatari *and* save the

world. Here, a new dilemma presents itself: When she wakes from her slumber, all Sayuri's feelings for Hiroki are erased. As she wakes, the special emotions she had regarding Hiroki up till that point vanish. In the parallel world in her dream, she was isolated, but she was able to become one with Hiroki; in exchange for returning to this world, Sayuri parts with her irreplaceable memories.

If you apply a narrative structure to it, at the end of the story, the "Sleeping Beauty" Sayuri ought to be awakened by a kiss from the "prince" Hiroki. The romantic love ideology, in which she's awakened by a kiss from the prince and falls into a happy marriage, is rejected in this work. Thus, in fulfilling the promise, the promised place is lost. Here, too, we can see the dilemma that something must be given up in order to gain something else. Even in the book, which offers a different ending from the film, Hiroki and Sayuri's conflict and resolution as they live in a world without the promised place become a main theme. Loss is like an asset generated by the results of Hiroki's and Sayuri's choices and actions.

At the end of this book, the theme of how to live with loss as an asset is brought to the fore. Sayuri's choice, which she makes in order to truly "awaken"; Hiroki, who accepts her choice; Takuya's decision not to show himself to Hiroki after sending him the journal recounting his three years of high school—Painful as they are, all of these resolutions were necessary in order to allow the characters to live their future lives autonomously.

On the far side of those resolutions, there is a small, modest bud of hope. *Hope* is another name for what surfaces beyond loss, beyond choices, beyond resolutions; in that sense, one could call *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* a tale of hope.

All quotes from the work of Kenji Miyazawa were taken from *New Compilation—The Complete Kenji Miyazawa* (Chikuma Shobou).

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